

# Book 7

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## Prologue

*"Twenty-two: do not forget the rest of Creation in the pursuit of your nemesis. Small kindnesses are the seed of grand consequences. Evil stays, Good compounds."*

– *"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", unknown author*

The entire Hirshwald, where she had once hunted with her cousins, was now painted grey. Teurshen and its lively muddy streets, Kleinach with its pretty green houses, Senken River where every spring people from miles away had come to fish. It was all grey.

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, watched day by day as her realm died on beautifully painted map.

Word trickled in from every front, following the scrying lines she had laid down through the Order of the Red Lion, and with every dawn the court painter drew a few more leagues of the Principate grey on the map at the heart of the Vogue Archive. Hannover was now bare of life, likely beyond recovery in this lifetime. Her own Rhenia was entirely in the hands of the dead save for the besieged city-fortress that was its capital. Only its first two layers of defence had been lost, last she heard from her commander there, but scrying had since been cut. Twilight's Pass still held – the Morgentor had been lost twice, but the Kingfisher Prince and Otto Redcrown had led daring offensives to take it back both times – yet that was meaningless when the last fortresses of the Hocheben Heights had fallen and the dead were pushing deep in Bremen.

Ashen grey, death's breath grey, spread through towns and villages that Cordelia had ridden through as a girl.

"The north fell the moment the Heights did," the Forgetful Librarian told her the day the news came, bluntly but not cruelly. "There won't be a living soul north of Brus come next winter."

Cordelia thought of striking her but held back. It was not untrue, and these days she had come to rely on the Librarian's propensity for brutal truthfulness. Most people would have held back when warning her of the effective end of her people as more than refugees and soldiers of fortune, but Cordelia no longer had time to spare for being handled. Clarity was a priceless luxury when every hour, every decision had lives on the line.

Saale, a small fortress first raised under the Iron Kings. The seven adjoining villages called the Shwestern, which Cordelia had once developed with coin in the hopes that they might grow into a small city. The valley of Kaninchenbau. Grey spread on the map, like a maw opening to devour the world whole.

"The refugees cannot stay in Brus," Cordelia said, watching the end times take shape.

Her eyes had misted, when she'd heard that Frederic Goethal had opened his gates wide to all Lycaonese. Brus was not rich, its lands hardly any better than those of its northern neighbours', so the Prince of Brus had effectively bankrupted himself when he'd welcomed four principalities' worth of teenagers and children. More than that, too. Every piece of bread shared with her people could not fill the belly of his own, and these days no one had granaries to fall back on. He had sacrificed a great deal for innocents. *A crown is not a privilege*, she'd once told Frederic when they'd been younger. Unsure of their power, of where they stood. *It is a duty*. He'd not asked a damned thing for any of it, the Kingfisher Prince.

Cordelia had known few men worthier of being a prince than Frederic Goethal.

"Brus will soon begin seeing fighting," the Librarian agreed. "The captains in Neustria sent too many reports of their fortresses being bypassed by raiders. We send your refugees further south, then. Segovia?"

"The ships will make a difference in evacuating further south still, should the principality collapse," Cordelia mused, and so it was settled.

The Highest Assembly had voted her emergency powers allowing her to settle refugees wherever she wished in the Procer, so long as part of the financial burden was shared by the high throne. She'd nearly faced a revolt in the Chamber over the motion, which stepped on the neck of all traditional conceptions of royal sovereignty, but they'd not quite had the nerve. Cordelia had unearthed too many of the skeletons her princes had buried for them to want to risk it. When she'd passed a measure allowing her to appoint superintendence supervising the collection of princely taxes, the First Prince had gotten a closer look at their finances than any of them were comfortable with.

No wonder they'd been willing to fight her tooth and nail over the motion: a little over half of them had been cheating the high throne on taxes. In times of peace that would have been a minor scandal, but in times of war? Cordelia had the authority to have their heads for it, and that wasn't even the part that terrified them. All she needed to do to ruin them was spread word to the street: entire cities would riot, screaming for the blood of the

traitors. The way she kept ramming measures through was making her no friends, and even losing her allies, but Cordelia Hasenbach was not reigning for pleasure or friendship. If there was enough of Procer left to rebel against her after the war ended, she would walk to the headsman's block with a smile.

The Lafran Stretch, Belles Collines, Faudefer and Patrin. The last two had still been full of people when the dead tunneled under the walls. Grey spread across the map, and not only to the north.

Cordelia's dying homeland was but a third of the war, if even that, and dooms never came alone. Hainaut had come out the best of it, irony of ironies. The Black Queen had stripped the principality of most her armies before retreating, but she had left her last general – Lady Abigail Tanner – in a solid defensive position at the Cigelin Sisters. The grounds won against the dead by the *victory* at Hainaut had been promptly lost anew, the dead claiming them quicker than they could be defended, but the White Knight had broken the bridge to the north and so ended the immediate looming threat.

The Chosen had followed that up by scoring an upset victory at Malmedit that collapsed the tunnels and anchored the eastern defence line before dedicating himself body and soul to the war on Keter. He had led regular sorties into enemy territory to break up their forces before they could mass in large numbers, to great success. The White Knight had in truth been so effective there'd been talk of trying to seize and fortify the ruins of the capital to secure the locked Hellgate there, though General Abigail had forcefully stamped out any such notions. Once Cordelia would have enjoyed the White Knight's successes, the way they proved Damned were not the only ones who could lead in dark times, but no longer.

Hanno of Arwad had crossed a line in the Arsenal, when he'd made the choice to stand in the way of the preservation of Procer. If it had been only a moment of hard-headed principle divorced from the realities of the situation, in time Cordelia might have grown to forgive it. Trust would not have resumed, but wariness would have ebbed. But it was not as simple as that. Cordelia could not think of the way the White Knight had refused to negotiate, to compromise, without hearing in those terse answers the echo of another Chosen's voice. Laurence de Montfort, the Saint of Swords, feet on the table as she told Cordelia that the Procer must burn so something better might come of it.

Would Hanno of Arwad let them burn too, for his principles? Cordelia found she was not sure of the answer, not anymore. There could be no trust there, no relying on the Chosen. As in so many things she stood alone.

"The Heights were a body blow, but it's Cleves that will kill us if anything does," the Librarian sighed on a cold winter morning, sipping at a mug of tea.

The third and last front, Rozala Malanza's. For years it had been the story of victory, the proof that the dead could be beaten back that'd been so instrumental in keeping Procer from sinking into despair. And to her honour the Princess of Aquitan had stubbornly held even in the face of a Hellgate yawning open while she still suffered the siege of a great army of the dead. She could not be everywhere, though. The northern point of Cleves still held, and parts of the eastern shoreline as well, but Keter had swept out of Lake Pavin and devoured whole the western shore.

Tertre, Sengrin, Lagueroch. Grey spread like a sickness in the blood.

The walled city of Atandor was now under siege, and should it fall then the dead would have a way into the lowlands of Cleves. More terrible still, the forces of the Kingdom of the Dead would find nothing in their way as they spilled further south onto the plains of Brabant and Lyonis. And Atandor *would* fall, in three months at the latest. Agnes had been clear on that, as clear as the Augur could ever be. Its defenders had not run out of valour, but they had run out of food.

When the dead made it that far south, the war was over. Even if all they did was burn the crop fields before retreating, the ensuing starvation would collapse the Principate. Then even should the Kingdom of Callow be willing to starve itself feeding Procer, which was highly dubious, in practice the grain simply could not be moved and distributed quickly enough. There was a secret truth behind it all, though, one Cordelia had grasped in the wake of her uncle's death at Hainaut: the war was already lost. For Procer, anyway, if not yet the rest of Calernia. This was no longer about winning, it was about saving what she still could. Who she still could.

"We will have to recall Princess Rozala and her army before Atandor falls," the First Prince said.

It was giving most of Cleves over to the grey, but then it had already been made into a wasteland by Keter's Due when the Hellgate was opened near Trifelin. With so many of its best farmlands blighted, the principality could no longer feed itself.

"If she puts up a defence line around Peroulet it could hold for a few months while the dead are still massing," the Librarian muttered. "It won't be a popular decision, mind you, but it's the right one."

It was more than the army Cordelia wanted to salvage. Should she get assassinated – and it was becoming more likely that she would

be with every measure forced through the Highest Assembly – then the only other royal in Procer that could feasibly be elected to the high throne without too much quibbling was Rozala Malanza. The Princess of Aequitan might be one of the finest generals left to Procer, but she was now simply too valuable to keep risking in Cleves. Malanza would hate her for the order, but what did it matter? She had hated Cordelia to the bone since the Great War, and there would be no mending a hatred born of a mother's death.

"Gods forgive me," the Librarian suddenly said, "but we're not going to win this war, are we?"

Cordelia went still, for a heartbeat. She had not thought anyone else had noticed, not quite so soon. She needed a few months still before it became known, before panic and chaos spread-

"It'll be out east it's decided, in Praes," the Forgetful Librarian continued. "If the Black Queen can bring back diabolists and reinforcements in time for a strike at Keter to still be feasible."

The First Prince did not allow her relief to touch her face.

"Catherine Foundling will do what she must to settle the East," Cordelia said, dimly surprised to find she meant every word. "We must simply keep Procer afloat until she returns and the last gamble of this war can be taken."

That, though, was a lie. There was one last gamble awaiting beyond that, if arms failed and it all came down to the spectre of annihilation looming over all of Calernia. The First Prince had found the funds and the men, ensured all that could be done was. The corpse that had been dredged up from the depths of Lake Artoise could be awoken, the priests had promised her. It could be used as a weapon. One that would destroy Procer, perhaps, but Procer was already halfway into the grave. If it all else failed, Cordelia Hasenbach was not only the First Prince of Procer: she was also the Warden of the West. She had a responsibility to ensure at least some of Calernia survived the Dead King's fury.

And that responsibility, now, was as a finger laid against a trigger.

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Alaya did not enjoy war.

It'd surprised her when she had understood as much about herself, as she'd believed herself a harder woman than that. No tyrant had ever climbed the Tower to less than a stairway's worth of corpses and she had certainly been no exception, so she'd wondered what it was about war that made her balk. It was not the violence, surely, for Alaya was no stranger to the use of it. Rarely by her

own hands, but to a Dread Empress of Praes assassination was no less a necessary tool of ruling than laws or taxes. Was it the magnitude, she had wondered? Edmund Inkhand had once written, in that sardonically pointed manner so typical of his journals, that men only disapproved of murder so long as it did not involve banners and great numbers.

Yet though Alaya had enjoyed reading the old king's writings as a girl and then differently so as a woman, she simply did not have it in her to care for people – strangers, people in the abstract – the way that he so obviously had. Grief at the human condition was not burden she had to bear, so what *had* been the source of her unease? It was the indiscriminate nature of it all, Alaya had later come to understand after decades of wondering. The Conquest had been one of the cleanest, most efficient wars in living memory: it had been largely soldiers that died during it, no cities were sacked and the countryside was not ravaged. And still the entire exercise had been like a stone in a shoe.

War could not be controlled, not really. It could not be contained the way that assassination and intrigues could, risk and results balanced like lines of a ledger. To Alaya's eyes, using war to achieve one's ends was rather like setting fire to a house to kill a man: dangerous as much to you as the enemy. No without reason was it an old saying in the Wasteland that a lit blaze knew neither friend nor foe.

Knowing all this about herself, Dread Empress Malicia found herself darkly amused that she had regardless spent the last five years and change at war with other powers to various degrees. Most ironic of all was the civil war that Praes was still in the throes of, which she had spent no small amount of effort to start and then maintain in order to preserve her interests and that of the Empire. Perhaps that was why even going from success to success had somehow only increased her unease.

The dark-skinned beauty ran a finger across the obsidian table at which the Imperial council sat in session, admiring how it was all sculpted out of a single piece. Reputedly it was the work of Regalia II, carved when she'd been out campaigning in Callow. Given her death abroad it'd never been used by the empress herself: it was her successor, Maledicta II, who'd been the first to sit at it. In some parts of Praes there was even a turn of phrase about the tale: 'carving an empress' table', which meant undertaking an effort that would benefit only your successor.

Alaya was not particularly fond of the sculpted rim, which was a parade of twisting devils and kneeling foes, but she had fond memories of the table itself. She'd spent many hours seated at it during some of the best years of her life, those heady days after she had climbed the Tower and she had set to reforming Praes with the people dearest to her in the world. Back then the heart of

her council had been made up of a trusted few: Amadeus, Wekesa and Ime. On occasion others had been brought in for a few months or years so that particular issues might be settled with their expertise, but they had always been temporary additions.

Nowadays Alaya found her council was little like the old one, for all that Ime and a Black Knight still sat on it.

The mirror above the ever-burning fireplace in the back subtly fogged over, the polished bronze growing clouded as the old enchantment bound to the hallways outside the council room were triggered. Malicia retreated towards the end of the table, ensuring she would be seated by the time the first of them entered – she took the time to array herself in the throne-like seat, draping the folds of her bronze and green dress in a way that she knew lent her a regal air. Ime was the first to enter, as was her habit. Malicia's spymistress was visibly aging these days, the alchemies and spells that had slowed the ravages finally unravelling.

It was not an unusual thing in highborn, who all suffered the same fate when their flesh inevitably grew inured to the alchemies and began rejecting the spells. Some became desperate and began dealing with devils then, but only the foolish dared and Ime was nothing of the sort. It was a graceful aging, too, for all that the spymistress resented it: though her hair was now turning white and her skin creasing, she remained in good shape and firm flesh. Not that Ime would see it that way, of course.

Alaya was well aware that Wasteland aristocrats had an instinctual disgust towards the signs of old age, most of them having come to associate it with the lowborn as a consequence of being raised by ageless and seemingly forever-young relatives. It was a self-reinforcing shame, as highborn visible aging tended to retreat from good society to maintain the illusion of agelessness through their discretion. Malicia's spymistress offered a short bow, her modest blue robes whispering against the floor as she did, and wordlessly headed for the seat to the empress' left as she had for decades. The other woman she had been awaiting took longer to arrive, and took a different route.

It was necessary, given that Malicia's current Black Knight was an ogre and so physically incapable of squeezing through most doors.

High Marshal Nim – raised above other marshals after coming into her Name – was a very deliberate individual. The eastern door had been heightened and broadened for her but even so the ogre opened it slowly, as if she were afraid of slamming it into the wall. The Black Knight lowered her head to pass the threshold and only straightened when she was under the high ceiling of the council room, her plain armour of dark steel plate pulling taut against her. She wore no helm, leaving bare two dark braids framing a

tanned face as the rest of her hair went down her back untied. Her large eyes were a pale brown that leaned into pink, and her face seemed pulled into a permanent frown that made her large nose even more prominent.

She looked like something of a brute, as all ogres did, but Malicia knew better. Amadeus, on one of their evenings drinking terrible wine together, had noted that while Grem One-Eye was likely the finest general in the Dread Empire the ogre was a closer match to him than Ranker by a significant margin. Nim inclined her head and chest in the approximation of a bow, taking her prepared enchanted steel seat at the end of table facing Malicia. If there were others the Black Knight would have been seated at the empress' right, as was customary, but there was no need for such pageantry when it was only the three of them. There would be no fourth: Malicia had not allowed the honour of the Warlock's seat to any of the mages serving her.

The empress opened the council herself, voice ringing out.

"We have word from Foramen," Dread Empress Malicia said. "The Confederation of the Grey Eyries was... emboldened by news of the Black Queen's coming. They have resumed their attacks against Foramen and High Lady Wither."

Nim grimaced, thick lips pulling at thicker skin. All expressions looked exaggerated on ogres, by virtue of their size. It often made them seem foolish or stupid, so most who left the Hall of Skulls learned to school their faces into neutrality to avoid the impression – and so now their kind was known as being inexpressive instead.

"That tangles up the entire south for us, Your Dread Majesty," the Black Knight said. "Wither won't move while the enemy is at her gate, and Kahtan will be looking to sink a knife in her back."

High Lady Takisha of Kahtan would no doubt phrase it differently, Malicia thought, but Nim was essentially correct. With Thalassina a blackened ruin and Foramen in goblin hands, Kahtan had become the last high seat in the hands of a Taghreb highborn and so incredibly influential among their people. High Lady Takisha was much more interested in putting that influence to use in reclaiming Foramen for one of her kin than fighting battles on Malicia's behalf, not that the empress had pushed hard for such contributions. Until recently, it had suited her for Kahtan to largely sit the war out: it lent credence to the perception of stalemate between Sepulchral and the Tower that had been the keystone of her diplomatic strategy. Malicia has bled Kahtan dry of gold and mages as recompense for the feet-dragging, too, both of which had been useful in pursuing her plans abroad.



"High Lady Takisha has called her vassals to Kahtan," Ime shared. "Most Taghreb nobles in Praes will be there, considering she's the last human high seat in the south. We could skip her and attempt to muster them directly when they're gathered."

"It would be hasty to attempt as much," Malicia said. "We're not intending on extended fighting against the Grand Alliance."

And once peace was made the empress would be able to use Takisha Muraqib's absence as a reason to draw heavily on her troops for the Empire's contribution to the war on Keter. It would weaken her significantly going forward, hammering down one of the last nails that might potentially stick up to challenge Malicia's authority in Praes.

"We can settle this without the Taghreb," the Black Knight calmly agreed. "The key is making sure the Black Queen doesn't end up backing Sepulchral for the Tower. That would be an alliance difficult to beat on the field."

"From what we've intercepted of their correspondence," Ime said, "it seems like the Grand Alliance is keeping High Lady Abreha at a distance. Not hostile, but hardly allied."

"That could change," Malicia said, "should we damage Foundling's armies too much. If Amadeus were there to back I could not fathom her choosing Sepulchral's candidature over his, but he remains in the wind. Incidents will have to be arranged to turn that distance into enmity."

And sometimes Alaya did wonder if that wasn't the very reason Amadeus was absent: so that nothing could coalesce around him too early. If he was not putting pieces into place without binding himself to them, getting forces in motion without himself needing to be at the helm. But if that was truly the case, where was he? Even now, with his old apprentice at the gates, there was no hint of a plot in sight. Malicia knew better than to believe a man like him would disappear quietly into obscurity. It was worrying, that even Ime's best efforts had not been enough to find his trail.

"Assuming Callow begins by linking up with the deserters in the Green Stretch, as is most probable, I'll have infiltrators in place by the time the Army of Callow begins marching north," Ime said. "Given the positions our people in Sepulchral's ranks, arranging those incidents is achievable."

"It won't be enough," the Black Knight said. "Foundling didn't fight half a dozen wars to roll over for the Tower at the first sign of trouble, Your Dread Majesty. We'll have to bloody her before she even considers terms."

"It will take more than that," Ime frankly said. "It's been personal for her since the Night of Knives. If she's not forced to choose between drastic consequences and dealing with us, it's my belief she will absolutely keep pushing."

Neither of the two looked at her, even though the so-called 'Night of Knives' had been ordered by Malicia personally. It'd had unfortunate long-term consequences, she would admit, but the notion had been sound at the time. It'd been only tangentially a reprisal for Foundling's assassination attempts of her in Keter, after all. The most important motives had all been political in nature. After securing the Dead King's aid to keep Procer in check, Malicia had believed that the last major loose end to handle was Callow. She'd had allies in the Free Cities and ways to collapse that alliance's coherence, meaning that the last potential territorial threat to Praes had been a resurgent Kingdom of Callow under Catherine Foundling.

Decapitating the small but skilled cadre of individuals that the young queen had been relying on to rule her realm and carry out her reforms had only been logical, and in that aspect worked exactly as intended. Unfortunately, instead of returning home and licking her wounds the Black Queen had instead disappeared for a year and re-emerged as high priestess of the drow with a set of fresh armies at her back. There had, in Alaya's opinion, been no way for her to really predict that. It had effectively set the balance of power in the other direction and begun a cascade of events that'd made Callow into the most influential member of the Grand Alliance, which had in turn forced the empress to implement drastic measures to compensate.

And it might have been dangerous, it might have been hard and Alaya had more than once hesitated, but her plans had borne fruit. Foundling was now here in Praes, on grounds Malicia had prepared for years and desperate enough to accept terms when she was brought to the table. Now Malicia only needed to walk the path a little further still and it would all fall into place – she was, in other words, in one of the single most perilous positions of her entire reign. The last inch to the finish line was always the most treacherous. Alaya would know, considering how many people she'd killed there.

"I do not disagree," Malicia finally said. "I naturally leave picking the battlefield entirely to you, High Marshal. All of the Tower's resources are opened to your office in the pursuit of bringing Foundling to the table."

"A great honour, Your Dread Majesty," the Black Knight said, bowing her head.

Ime seemed about to speak when she suddenly closed her mouth, and a heartbeat later there was a polite knock at the door. Malicia's spymistress glanced at her and the empress nodded permission. Ime

slipped out a few moments and Malicia made small talk with Nim about her eldest son, who had recently wed, until she returned. Both women gave the spymistress their full attention when she did.

"The Black Queen has arrived in Praes," Ime said, closing the door behind her.

Malicia smiled. Finally.

"How close to Satus did she gate out?" the Black Knight asked.

Ime's lips thinned.

"She is not in the Green Stretch at all, High Marshal," the spymistress said. "The word came from High Lord Sargon: she's less than a day's march away from *Wolof*."

Dread Empress Malicia went still. *Wolof*, which was on the other side of the empire from any sort of ally of Callow's. *Wolof*, whose high lord she held in her thrall. *Wolof*, where Malicia had laid seeds for a great victory – the filling of a fourth seat at this very table.

Someone had just made a mistake, and to Malicia's sudden disquiet she was not certain whether it had been her or the Black Queen.

## Chapter 1: Debut

*"The trick is to always invite an unrelated highborn idiot to every council. When you inevitably execute them, all the other highborn idiots will behave for the rest of the discussion."*

*– Dread Emperor Vindictive I*

It was an impressive watchtower. All red brick and stone, three stories high and jutting out of the hills with an elegant silhouette. It'd fallen victim to that unfortunate Praesi tendency of having an open-sky spellcasting platform instead of a rooftop, but that was the most common practice in the Wasteland. The Sahelians had clearly shelled out good coin for this place, which made it all the more amusing that they'd not done the same for the force garrisoning it. The two dozen soldiers had prudently begun to leg it long before my first knights reached the bottom of the hills, so now it was my personal banner flying in the wind.

The phalange who'd pulled down the golden lion banner of the Sahelians and replaced it with the Sword and Crown was gone, leaving the four of us to look out at the view spread out below,

and even though it was a thing of beauty I found myself growing irritated. No, not 'even though'. Because.

Wolof was beautiful, and it kind of pissed me off.

"This is ridiculous," I complained. "I read the reports, they had a goddamn demon loose in the streets just a few years ago."

"Ah, the old Wasteland special," Her Grace, Princess Vivienne of Callow, drawled.

I rolled my eye at her. Being a magnanimous soul, I was not bitter in the slightest that she could wear a nice pale blue dress with simple silver circlet over her milkman's braid instead of, you know, being stuck in full regalia and the Mantle of Woe. Truly, why would I envy anyone the privilege of not wearing a fucking cloak in the Wasteland's heat? It wasn't like I'd seriously considered weaving a miracle that'd warm her with Night, much less almost done it twice.

I was a better person than that, and also she'd probably notice.

"That's actually civil war," Hakram noted. "Though considering the demon incident came at the end of a brutal war of succession, you're not entirely wrong."

Adjutant was standing on his prosthetic limbs comfortably, not needing to lean against the crenellation in the slightest, and like it often did the sight had my lips quirking into a satisfied smile. He wasn't going to be winning footraces anytime soon and I'd not send him into too rough a fight, but Hakram was far gone from the days of hissing pain and being wheelchair-bound. Masego's work on the arm and leg had been extraordinary, the shifting parts of steel and leather that mimicked muscles returning much of what he had lost to the tall orc. He no longer wore the whole set of burned plate he'd once been known by, instead keeping only the breastplate and the skirt, and his black hair was worn shorter than I'd seen it in years.

"You can never go wrong betting on civil war, when it comes to Praes," Vivienne conceded.

"Don't you two go pretending this is normal," I insisted. "I mean, look at the place!"

Almost half of Wolof's population had died when Sargon Sahelian rose up to overthrow his aunt, Lady Tasia, and the situation had gotten bad enough in there that the Legions of Terror had seen no choice but to forcefully invest the city. Something their doctrine specifically warned against attempting unless there was no other choice, when that city was a High Seat of Praes. Now, though? You'd never know unless you were told. Tall walls rose elegantly from the dusty ground, all sun-drenched stone and pale

red brick, but from our position here atop a distant hill we could see a stretch of the city itself and it was *impressive*.

Wolof as it now stood had little to do with the village sprouted around a ritual site it'd supposedly grown out of. The modern city had actually shed those old grounds, part of them ending up as a handful of riverside villages that served as an informal port called Sinka and the rest now a closed compound to the north of the city that the locals called Zaman Ango: a great mass of mazes and pyramids hidden behind mud brick walls, ancient places of power that the Sahelians kept to themselves and their favourites. The actual city, surrounded by the greater walls, had instead been cut away at and remade until it was as glorious as its rulers believed themselves to be.

Broadly speaking, Wolof was a thin half-circle with the flatness facing north and two parts jutting out of said flatness: towering noble palaces and the set of fortifications surrounding an aqueduct. Avenues criss-crossed the length of it like arteries, tying together gates and districts by a pleasing design, while that great aqueduct – much too ornate to be of Miezian make, with its stele-like pillars – swept down from a great hill to the north-east like a raised river of stone. Cisterns and smaller water funnels covered rooftops, spreading out like a web of stone and copper, while three-story houses on tall steps stood so close together their backs were as walls. Windows were curved and often thick pillars of stone jutted out of walls, like strange handholds for giants to climb.

It was the colour that staggered me, though. Wolof was said to be the greatest vault of magic in all of Praes, its libraries and spell repositories rival to the Tower's if not even greater, and unconsciously that'd made me think of it as dark and dreary. Black magic made into a city. Instead it was a riot of red and yellow, some paints fading but others biting fresh, and everywhere subtle lines of green were woven in. Rooftop gardens gathered around cisterns and pools were adorned with bright banners – green and yellow, orange and purple, cream and blue – hung to look like shivering walls. It was a gorgeous, thriving city that somehow made Laure look like half a hovel even after being half-razed by godsdamned demon of Madness. It was infuriating as it was impressive.

The last of us, correctly interpreting my vehemence as a polite and reasonable request of explanation, broke the almost melancholy she'd been in as she watched her childhood home in the distance.

"My cousin Sargon was made to study wards as a young man," Akua said. "For a time it was a fad with the great families, after Wekesa the Warlock came to prominence. Everyone fancied they would raise a mage to beat him at his own game."

I snorted. Yeah, they would. Never mind that Masego's father had been apprentice – and Apprentice – to the last Warlock as well as a frankly ridiculously talented man in a lot of regards. No doubt there'd been an expectation that gold and a noble pedigree would beat out any peasant mage's effort at anything.

"How'd that go?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Corpses and screaming, mostly," Akua noted. "Warding becomes a rather dangerous art when one reaches the heights of High Arcana."

"And this leads to the city looking pristine how?" Vivienne impatiently asked.

My successor, made a genuine princess by some truly inspired wrangling of Callowan law courtesy of Hakram, kept a civil tone as she spoke. Much of the venom had gone out over the years, though Vivienne quite clearly despised the Doom of Liesse – who was not particularly above needling her when she could, I'd admit.

"Though Sargon was only ever a passable practitioner of the Art," Akua continued, "he *did* take to the paired engineering studies impressively. He was often called on for work in Zaman Ango because of this, and evidently his experiences there proved of use when rebuilding the city."

A grunt of acknowledgement was her only answer, while I allowed my own gaze to wander around.

It was a nice morning, I thought. The sun was warm, the wind lazy and the company more than decent. It was hard to enjoy nice mornings, though, when I knew the world was coming closer to toppling into the dark with every breath we took. Hasenbach was still keeping Procer together, but the cracks were spreading and I couldn't be sure how long it would be before the Principate collapsed. Still, at least the view was stunning. The watchtower the four of us stood on was maybe an hour's ride away from the city, set on few hilly slopes. South of Wolof, these were as close to heights as you could get for a dozen miles.

Behind us the Army of Callow and its auxiliaries were encamped in force, palisades already half-raised, while to the west the raging waters of the Upper Wasaliti roiled. The east led deeper into the Wasteland, into the lands of the closest families sworn to the Sahelians, while between us and the city there was nothing save roads and farmland. Not the kind of fields you'd see in Callow, though. Small hills of stratified stone and dust rose gently, with vividly green small 'valleys' filled with orchards or crops nestled in between. I couldn't see much wheat here, but sweet potatoes and cucumbers were common and I saw fruits that

would be worth a fortune in Callow – lemons, dates and pineapples, to name just a few.

“Those small green nooks,” I said, studying a few of the closer ones with a narrowed eye. “There’s raised stones around them. Those aren’t wards, though, are they?”

It’d be a frankly absurd amount of magic, if they were, and even people without the Gift or my sensitivities to power would have been able to feel it.

“Not exactly,” Akua hedged. “It is the setting of a metaphysical boundary, but nothing as... decisive as a ward. It is meant to keep the magic of field rituals contained when they are used.”

*Right*, I thought. They’d need to, otherwise the inefficiency of trying to make the ground cultivable would be a nightmare. The amount of wasted power would make the rituals high unusable, and probably wreck the soil too. There was a reason magical healing was dangerous when you did it too much in the same place, and the principles involved here weren’t all that different.

“You’re saying all those gardens of green were made with blood?” Vivienne asked, sounding horrified.

“The grounds around Wolof are not so poor,” Akua replied, shaking her head. “Perhaps a tenth of these are made fertile by ritual killing, on a good year. It is only when the weather spoils crops or the ground sickens that widespread sacrifices are required.”

“And the Sahelians are said to have the finest rituals in Praes,” Hakram gravelled. “Fewer deaths required and the ground is healed longer.”

Akua laughed, the motion pleasing to watch in the conservatively cut but tightly fitting blue and orange dress she’d elected to wear as her form. As had become her habit she wore no jewels, even her black and orange cloak kept closed by a simple iron brooch.

“You can simply ask, Adjutant,” she said. “It is true enough my kin’s ritual rites are superior, though the mages of Kahtan yet make our attempts to manipulate the weather look like the work of fumbling children. My ancestors parlayed their advantage into expanded influence: we could usually afford to spare sacrifices as gifts, which in turn spared lords the costs of relying on the Tower instead.”

As a young girl I would have been sickened to the bone by the thought of human sacrifice, and in truth part of me still was. Akua was talking about trading people like cattle – and the laws that restricted that fate to criminals only were rather recent to Praes – and consigning them to ugly deaths so magic could be

squeezed out of their lifeblood. I'd sent too many people into the grinding gears of wars to be able to speak on that without the hypocrisy choking me, though. How many people would a Praesi lord kill like that, in a lifetime's span? A hundred, three hundred? I'd spent more of my people on skirmishes leading up to battles without batting an eye.

I could tell myself it was soldiers I'd spent and I'd not opened their throats like lambs headed for the spit, but that was just dressing up the truth. And so I stayed silent, did not allow my lips to curl in disgust. If a practice offended me, I ought to either act to end it or shut up. Empty condemnations served no purpose but patting yourself on the back. Establishing a solid grain trade between Praes and Callow would do more to kill the practice than the most convincing sermon in the history of sermons, and I fully intended on securing that by treaty before I left the Empire. Among other things. Praes had been left to moulder for too long. That mess didn't look like it was going to fix itself, so all that was left was getting my hands dirty.

"Horrid," Vivienne flatly replied. "Though it seems to have bought loyalty. My Jacks believe none of High Lord Sargon's vassals have turned on him."

"Not openly, anyway," I muttered.

"Scribe was in agreement, before you sent her away with Archer," Hakram reminded me.

"Scribe lost control of the Eyes in the empire to Ime," I said. "She's got people around here, but she's not all-seeing."

The Webweaver, like every other kind of spider, needed a web to crawl on.

"In the wake of my mother's death and the financial difficulties that preceded it, I expect the Tower's spymistress to have sunk deep hooks in the region," Akua sighed. "My cousin proved to be a fine enough lord, but his seat was shattered and he had to spend time to consolidate power. The Eyes will not have missed the opportunity."

We weren't blind in the region, far from it, but it couldn't be denied the opposition had better eyes on most everything. That was fine: I'd gotten used to fighting that sort of war. The trick was to hit hard and move quicker than the enemy could follow.

"The real question is how many of his vassals will bring their armies if he calls," I said. "Only a third of his personal forces are with High Marshal Nim's field army, but that doesn't make what he's got here a large force. He'll need his lords if he wants to do more than hide behind his walls."



We believed Sargon Sahelian to have forces in the area of five thousand soldiers in the city and its outskirts, which in most cases would have been a pittance compared to the sixteen thousand Callowans and auxiliaries I'd brought with me. The trouble was that this wasn't a petty border fort, it was Wolof. If we tried to take that city by force our numbers might genuinely not be enough. High Seats were always full of nasty surprises, and this one would be worse than most.

"If it comes that, we'll have to take the city before they get here," Vivienne said.

"I do not recommend trying the Sererian Walls," Akua frankly replied. "Repairing their wards will have been my cousin's utmost priority after his ascension, it will be long done. His mages will hammer away at any force we send from behind their protection."

"Juniper doesn't believe we can take the city in fewer than six months," Hakram noted. "Even if we seize the fortress in the northern hills and cut off the aqueduct there, there are too many wells inside the walls. We would be betting on food running out instead of water if it comes to a siege."

Which would be quite the gamble, considering we had no supply lines of our own. We might end up hungry before the enemy did. My army was carrying its foodstuff with it, in the Legion manner, but aside from the rare convoy through the Twilight Ways there wouldn't be more coming. If we'd emerged further south, closer to the Blessed Isle, it might have been possible to arrange a supply line out of Callow. I'd chosen otherwise, though. First because down south was exactly where Malicia and Sepulchral wanted us, but also because I didn't want to set up that supply line in the first place. I couldn't really afford to, when I needed all that food and people headed west instead for the greater war still being waged there.

So instead we'd emptied granaries and grabbed everything we could before moving out east. In practice we had about six month's worth of food with us, though with the planned convoys we would *maybe* manage to stretch that to seven in a pinch. That would be enough if everything went according to plan, which pretty much meant it wasn't enough. So the Hellhound and I had gotten... inventive.

"We don't actually need to take the city," I said. "It's not what we're after here. There's going to be a battle before this campaign is over, but it won't be in Wolof unless something goes catastrophically wrong. We're here to *rob* Sargon Sahelian, not kill him."

Funny thing about Wolof, these days: it was probably the only High Seat in the whole of Praes that had a significant food

surplus. After its losses during the war of succession its population had been massively lowered while its farmland remained largely untouched, and it'd kept trading heavily with Callow until relations broke. Throw in that the field force it'd had to feed had been relatively small – by virtue of large chunks of the Sahelian household troops either dying at Second Liesse or when the Fourteenth stormed the city – and the city was currently the Wasteland's undisputed queen when it came to the fullness of her granaries.

I wanted that grain to feed my army, so naturally I was going to trick a High Lord of Praes out of it.

"Banners are approaching," Vivienne sharply said.

I followed her gaze, eye narrowing as I found what she meant. Riders, maybe twenty of them, and a half dozen banners between them. I murmured a short prayer to the Crows before drawing on Night, a sluggish handful of power answering my will after a moment. I sharpened my eyesight with it, wasting not a drop, and studied the approaching men. The golden lion of the Sahelians flew highest, standing out starkly on the elaborate banner of that line: an oval filled with curved swaths of black and red, stripes of small white teeth cutting through looking outwards. I saw a blue stork and purple dog flying lower, while the other banners were entirely patterning of colour.

"The stork and dog are the Bassa and the Chenoi," Akua explained after I shared. "The two closest houses to the east. They must have already had a presence in the city when we arrived."

So Sargon was sending us a message that he wasn't standing alone. I rather admired how quickly he'd gotten over the surprise of our arrival, considering my army had begun moving out of the gates south of Wolof barely an hour before dawn and it wasn't even noon. In a few hours he'd put together enough of a plan to feel comfortable sending an embassy to me, which I took as a healthy reminder that underestimating anyone who'd been able to claim and keep a High Seat of Praes was a good way to end up dead. I watched the riders approach and smiled, rolling my shoulder as if to limber it.

"Finally," I said. "Let's go see what your cousin has to say, Akua."

—

I waited for them at the top of the shallowest slope, easy to see from a distance.

Hakram and Vivienne stood at my right, Akua at my left and around us the Order of Broken Bells sat the saddle in utter silence. Like statues armoured in shining steel, lances raised like a

whispered promise of violence. The envoys dismounted at the bottom of the hill. Not all of them, though, only three: two men and a woman, all Soninke and no older than thirty. Akua leaned closed to whisper in my ear.

"The man in the centre is Chikodi Sahelian," she said. "He is my cousin twice removed, but more closely related to Sargon. They were at odds as children."

I inclined my head in thanks, her breath still warm against my cheek. The other two were nobles too, going by the golden eyes, so at a guess I'd say they were from the Bassa and the Chenoi. The rest of the delegation stayed mounted like my knights, their horses well-disciplined and their colourful scale armour of fine make. Career soldiers, those, career killers. That was fine. I had those too, and mine were better. Chikodi Sahelian, a strikingly good-looking man almost as tall as Hakram, took the lead of his party and rose halfway up the slope before offering a perfect courtly bow.

"This one humbly greets you, Queen of Callow," the noble said.

Ugh. I glanced at Akua, who looked amused. She'd only ever used formal Praesi diplomatic language with me the once and it'd been mostly to mock me, something I found myself belatedly grateful for. Not the mockery, the other thing. If he stuck to that the whole time this was going to be irritating.

"So, out of curiosity," I said, allowing a Laure drawl to slip into my voice. "What is it you *did* that made you so eminently expendable you got picked?"

Chikodi's face blanked. Ah, how nostalgic. As if him aggressively not giving me a reaction wasn't already one.

"This one begs your pardon, mighty one," Chikodi calmly said, "for he does not understand your meaning."

"He used to shove Sargon down the stairs in the Western Palace," Akua noted. "And spill ink on his parchments just before we had assignments due. There was also enmity between their fathers over the position of seneschal of Sinka, I believe."

"And Sargon sent him here over that, knowing there was a decent chance I'd just crack open his skull and rip out whatever I wanted to know?"

Chikodi's face did not change, though a slight tremor went up his leg. Akua elegantly shrugged.

"We are *Sahelians*, dearest," she reminded me.

"Cold," I replied, not without appreciation.

Small slights and all that. I'd never been one to mind a bit of petty retribution.

"Gods Below," Chikodi hoarsely said. "It is true. You really are Lady Akua returned, as the stories said."

The woman at his side, soft-skinned but sharp-eyed, let out a small hiss of surprise. I glanced at her hand and found a few fading motes of magic there, reluctantly impressed she'd been able to use even a minor spell without my noticing.

"And unbound," she said. "A shade, yet unbound."

The conversation might have unravelled further, if someone hadn't stepped in.

"You used a spell on one of us under truce banner," Vivienne said, tone even.

All three of them froze. It wasn't necessarily a breach of truce terms to do as much, in truth, but it was... toeing a line.

"Not on any of you, not directly," the woman began, but I interrupted with a snort.

"What an auspicious start," I said. "Fine, I'll let this one go."

She looked relieved for a moment, before smiling and bowing and thanks.

"Break your fingers," I casually said. "Five of them. Same hand."

The smile went away. A moment of silence passed, all eyes on me. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Well?" I asked.

Golden eyes sought me out and found not a speck of sympathy. You couldn't let Wasteland nobles get one of you, not even a small thing. And you could never just let it go without answer – they'd lose all respect for you immediately, see you as someone that could be crossed with impunity. The fingers would heal easy enough, she might even be able to do it herself if she was a fine enough mage. It was the pain that was the price I was asking. The pain and the humiliation. She looked through the rest of us and found no purchase, no willing intercessor, and her face stilled.

"As you say, Black Queen," the mage replied.

There was a sharp crack, as she began with her thumb and swallowed a scream. Granting her no further attention, I moved my gaze to a shaken Chikodi.

"You've got my attention," I said. "What does High Lord Sargon want?"

"The High Lord desires only peace and friendship, mighty one," Chikodi said. "And shares that this is the will of Her Dread Majesty herself, not merely his own wish."

"Huh," I replied, unimpressed. "That's quite polite of you, really, but I happen to have come over for a spot of war. Whether or not that involves me sacking your city and putting every Sahelian not in my service to the sword is up to Sargon, but I'll be honest – we're not looking good at the moment."

It was surprisingly cathartic to threaten Praesi nobility like this, I found. I really should do it more often.

"The Sererian Walls have never fallen," Chikodi evenly said. "This would be-"

"They fell to the Legions, when your lord was raised," Adjutant interrupted.

Anger flickered on the nobleman's face, the most visible reaction so far. It took me a heartbeat to understand why he would likely be more offended at Hakram interrupting than the rest of us, and my fingers tightened around my staff when I did. Ah, Praesi. The remembrance of why I'd despised so many of them as young girl had begun to fade but here they were, so kindly restoring it for me.

"They have never fallen when the city was not at war with itself," Chikodi curtly said.

"Not quite as impressive a boast," I noted. "All right, this is beginning to turn into a waste of my time. What exactly is it that Sargon's offering as terms so I don't torch his home to teach the Tower a lesson?"

Chikodi's eyes moved to Akua, but she only faintly smiled. She had asked no mercy of me when it came to Wolof or her kin. I was still uncertain whether that was before she did not believe it would be needed or because she did not believe it deserved. I glanced at the mage, who had finished breaking her fingers, and coldly smiled. She flinched.

"High Lord Sargon requests nothing of you, mighty one," Chikodi said. "He only offers tokens of his friendship and esteem, as well as his help to achieve your intent in these lands."

"So a bribe," I said, rolling my eye. "Disappointing. Give the numbers on offer to Adjutant, I've been bored enough for a day."

I didn't even bother to give goodbyes before turning my back on him, limping away. It was hard to see properly under the helms so

I couldn't be sure, but what little I could glimpse told me that more than a few of my knights were grinning like sharks under their helmet. For all that they looked dignified, they must have been enjoying seeing Praes being under the boot after keeping it on our throat for over half my life. Vivienne fell in at my side, abandoning the talks just as indifferently. We'd never had any intention of negotiating with the first envoy the High Lord sent us.

"We've given enough slights that Sargon should be livid when he hears," Vivienne said.

Which was good, because right now we wanted him angry.

"He's a Sahelian," I reluctantly said. "He won't be that easy to bait."

If he were, he'd be dead by now. I had little good to say of the way Praesi highborn raised their own, but I'd not deny that their methods were cruelly effective at weeding out those who could easily be manipulated.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing, Catherine. I know Juniper wants him goaded into an attack, but we don't need that to get what we want," Vivienne said. "So long as he believes you meant what you said, that we came for Wolof to burn out Malicia's allies, we have our foot in the door."

That had been the point of mistreating and mocking the delegation so much, after all: getting across the impression that was utterly uninterested in talks. Making sport of envoys was the sort of thing a half-mad warlord might do, if she really had come here to sack the city so that Malicia would lose her strongest northern supporter. Why bother to keep to the niceties when you were talking to torch fodder? What Juniper had wanted out of this was more military in nature. She was hoping the insults would either anger Sargon enough to risk a night attack on our camp or make him desperate enough that he resorted to one anyway to improve his bargaining position.

We'd be waiting for him if he did.

"If we catch him out while he's trying a sortie and wipe the attacking force, it only strengthens our hand," I said.

The first part of robbing someone was putting their knife at their throat. People were disinclined to part with gold and goods unless you made it clear they had something a lot more precious to lose. It was why the Army of Callow had crossed into Creation so early: I wanted our fortified camp built, finished with some time to spare for the men to rest. My soldiers wouldn't be getting a full night's sleep: under cover of dark, we would be going on the offensive.

"So long as we come out on top of that skirmish," Vivienne said. "If we lose, it's us who's pushed on the backfoot."

"Best we don't lose, then," I simply said.

Wasn't that always the way? Some of my officers still insisted that the Battle of Hainaut had been a victory, but I knew better. In a strategic sense, the battle had brought us to the ragged edge: a major defeat either here in Praes or on any Proceran front was now all it took for the house of cards to come tumbling down on our heads. Besides, there was another plan behind all this that my friend didn't know. One I was keeping closer to my chest: it had not been a mistake that Akua was there for the envoys to see, so verifiably unbound. I was dangling bait for someone to catch.

"More than you know," Vivienne said. "I got word from Archer before joining you with the delegation."

My limping steps stuttered to a stop.

"And?" I asked.

"They'll be here tonight," the blue-eyed princess said. "I expect losing a fight while they're watching would rather undermine our cause, so caution is in order."

I grinned. Splendid timing, this. A little too splendid to be natural, in this case it was no accident: I'd sent Archer and Scribe ahead counting on 'coincidence' ensuring they came back at the right time. I'd not yet known what the right time would be, but what did that matter? The day didn't matter, so long as I knew where the step was in the dance. I knew my grin had turned a tad savage, but I didn't mind. This had been overdue. Malicia had had herself a grand old time these last few years, lighting fires in all our backyards while she rode out the messes she caused hidden in the Tower. Safely away from the fray.

It was time I returned the favour and started lighting fires of my own.

## Chapter 2: Perplex

*"People are never easier to fool than when they believe they're fooling you."*

*– King Alistair Fairfax, the Fox*

When was the last time I'd gone even six months without sleeping in a tent?

The thought amused more the more I thought about it. Elizabeth Alban, the ol' Queen of Blades herself, had conquered the closest

thing there ever was to a Callowan empire before the Watch slit her throat in her bed. My war record had led people to compare us on occasion – apparently there was a ballad and everything – but I actually figured I had more in common with her successor: Richard the Elder. They only started calling him the Elder in later histories, see, after he named his eldest son Richard as well. At the time they'd called him 'Richard Saddlesore'. The sobriquet was well-earned, considering he'd spent nearly all his reign moving from one side of his realm to another putting down rebellions.

Most everything the Queen of Blades had conquered west of the Whitecaps rose up the moment she died, and then Callowan nobles afraid of the growing power of the Albans promptly crowned his cousin the moment he crossed the mountains to handle said revolts. Praes had inevitably thrown its hat into the ring when they smelled blood, of course, never mind that they'd *just* gotten whipped back into the Wasteland under Regalia II. King Richard the Elder had actually done pretty well at staving off the collapse of his inherited 'empire' for a generation, only ceding independence to a few western territories, but by the time he'd died in his late thirties it'd been almost a decade since he'd last set foot in his own capital.

It'd been much shorter than that, for me, but I couldn't deny that I'd spent most of my reign as Queen of Callow outside my kingdom. There was always another fire to put out, wasn't there? I raised a small cup of wine in the air, drawing a raised eyebrow from Akua.

"You and me both, Richard," I muttered. "May we rest our buttocks in the next world."

There was a moment of silence.

"I'm not touching that," Vivienne decided.

Hakram, the sole loyal soul in this nest of traitors, raised his cup of water to match my toast and we drank. The four of us had convened in my tent, around the beautiful table that Indrani was still adding to. The last relief was parts of the Battle of Hainaut, and I was always careful to sit on the other side. Robber would have loved the sight of him striking a match and the Dead King's plans going up in flames, but I still couldn't look at the carved goblin face without my gut clenching. There were quite a few seats prepared, since even before most of us stayed for the upcoming war council we had a report to entertain. We couldn't really finalize our plans for the night without Masego's seal of approval.

The phalanges had notified us he'd returned through the Ways and Zeze wasn't the type to go wash and change before reporting, so I wasn't even halfway done with my cup by the time he swept in past



my guards. His informal pupil followed, my waved hand stopping the legionaries from taking issue with it, and I rolled my eye at Masego as he dropped himself into the seat across from me. The black robes he still wore had a subtle gold filigree, nowadays, but aside from that little of him had changed since he'd first become the Hierophant.

He still bore the same long braids inlaid with trinkets, wore the same black silk eyecloth over his burning glass eyes – nowadays a match to the one I wore over the eye the Hawk had taken from me – and wore the same comfortably worn old boots. The only change was that he'd begun to grow a beard: still glorified stubble, for now, but it rather suited his face and made him look older. A little like his father, actually, though the Warlock's beard had been much fuller. He looked tired but in a good mood, which I took as a good sign.

"The warding scheme has changed from what you outlined, Akua," Hierophant said.

Behind him, already forgot, his recent shadow was shuffling about on her feet awkwardly. The Apprentice, the young Ashuran mage known as Sapan, was coated in dust from head to toe and visibly exhausted. He'd probably made her do all the groundwork, I thought with a twinge of amusement. She looked hesitant to take a seat at my table without an explicit invitation, so I took pity on her and caught her eye before nodding in invitation. She bowed her head in thanks, sliding into a chair even as Masego helped himself to a pitcher of magically cooled water with equally magically obtained lemon quarters floating in it.

If you counted sending a cohort of goblins to empty High Lord Sargon's orchards as magic, anyway.

"It was a possibility, as I mentioned when we discussed the matter," Akua replied. "Yet the central patterns remained the same, I expect?"

Masego drank deep of his cup of water, filling it again almost immediately and not noticing Apprentice's hand inching halfway towards it before she drew back with a sigh.

"More or less," Masego agreed. "They mostly made changes to more strongly close off entry by Arcadia or the Ways. Recent modifications, about as old as the Arsenal. I imagine the city will have received the same work."

We'd expected as much, but it was useful to know both those options were off the table if it came to an assault on Wolof.

"You managed it anyway," I said, half a question.

Under the cloth he rolled his eyes at me.

"It was not that sophisticated a ward," Masego said. "Of course I cracked it, Catherine. It's done, and it was subtle enough they won't notice."

He mulled over things for a moment longer, dutiful in his attempt to make a report – though apparently not dutiful enough to ever read the text about how to give them the Legions had written. Not for lack of opportunity, since Juniper still had a scroll thrown into his tent at least once a month. I was pretty sure Indrani was making a pyramid.

"Sapan crawled uphill for half an hour under an illusion to place my artefact against the bottom of the wall," Hierophant noted. "She did well. She should get a raise."

Apprentice look startled and a little flattered, but there was one detail wrong there. I cleared my throat, but Hakram took one for the team and spoke up first.

"We don't actually pay her," Adjutant informed him.

Masego eyed me skeptically, brow rising.

"Is that slavery?" he asked. "We're against that, I feel. *I'm* against that."

"We're against slavery," I confirmed. "There's laws and everything."

He seemed pleased at me personally, like I actually had anything to do about that.

"Experience could be considered to be her compensation," Akua suggested.

Well, she *had* been Evil for decades. That was bound to leave marks.

"Spoken like someone who's never had to pay taxes in their damned life," I muttered under my breath.

Her lips quirked in a sly smile but she did not deign to answer my accusation. Gods, now I *had* to pay the girl otherwise fifteen-year-old me would have slit my throat over it. Mind you, that girl had never been one to mind a bit of knifing so it wasn't as strong a remonstrance as you'd think.

"We'll put aside a stipend for you on top of what the Grand Alliance already offers," I told Apprentice. "Your help in this is much appreciated, Sapan."

The dark-haired girl licked her lips, nervous, and nodded.

"May I – Your Majesty – could I... trade that for an hour a day with Lord Hierophant's grimoires?" she hesitantly asked.

I turned an eye to Masego, who actually looked rather charmed. He'd taken well to her since Hainaut, I suspected it was half the reason Hanno had agreed to lend her to us – the other half being Arthur had come along too and the two were thick as thieves.

"Keep her out of the dangerous stuff," I said.

"Of course," he immediately agreed, sounding surprised.

Ah, my mistake.

"Akua," I said, "please go with them and tell him what the dangerous stuff is."

"I feel like the situation has gone in somehow disastrously wrong, when I am called upon as the voice of sorcerous restraint," the golden-eyed shade noted, but she was still smiling.

"Tell me about it," I sighed.

She rose smoothly, offering me an ironic bow I rolled my eye at, and linked an arm with Masego as he did the same. They immediately started arguing in Mthethwa about what qualified as 'safe' – Zeze was insisting that the smiting spell was exactly that, so long as you kept it aimed at the enemy – while Sapan followed suit after affording me a deeper bow.

"I'll see to the stipend," Adjutant gravelled. "And extract a fuller report out of them while you two handle the war council."

Though the Night had been shattered and broken first by the Dead King's sorcery and then Hierophant's even harsher mercy, I had still been bound to the power in a deep and intimate way. Night came slower these days, and it was granted only by the will of the Sisters where once it had flown freely, but the mark of Sve Noc on my soul had not waned. I could still sense the coming of night like a sixth sense, through that strange instinct that was inhumanly accurate. And what I sensed told me that, as usual, Hakram was right. Nightfall was only two hours away, which meant we'd be cutting it close if we didn't split to attend to our duties.

"Much appreciated," I replied.

We rose to follow the others after scratching a few notes on parchment with his bone hand, sending in a few phalanges after him to prepare the tent for the war council. Juniper, as was her habit, came in half an hour early to make sure everything was to her tastes. I'd forgotten how tall she was, in our years

physically apart: she still had almost two feet on me, and she was built *thick*. With that grim, broad face and the sharp white fangs she made for an even more imposing sight than before now that we were older. Which made it all the more of a contrast when Aisha followed in behind her, the very picture of a quintessential Taghreb beauty with her carefully styled hair and elegant smile.

"Move the maps away from wine carafe," Juniper ordered a phalange in a growl. "Whose bright idea was that?"

"Good evening, Catherine," Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara greeted me.

The faint exasperation at her friend and superior's growling about was a worn and beloved habit, almost made a game between them from years of use.

"Aisha," I grinned back. "Juniper."

She turned to look at us, almost surprised, and nodded.

"Catherine, Vivienne," she curtly replied.

Vivienne was no more offended than I, the two of us well used to the Hellhound's ways. At times, though, it felt like she was being twice as hard as she used to be to make up for the way she'd been knocked out of the war for two years. Even now Aisha had told me that she visibly trembled when exhausted and slept uneasily at least a few nights a month. I wouldn't have placed her in command if she were any worse, even if she would likely never have forgiven me for that, but sometimes I was still... concerned. I kept it to myself, though. There was no doubt in my mind that she'd see it as an insult.

Our war council streamed in, either early or on time. General Zola Osei, Hune's successor who'd ended up as Juniper's second in the cobbled together First and Second Army we'd taken east – some had taken to calling it the Fifth as a jest. Grandmaster Brandon Talbot for the Order, and for the Dominion the two lordlings that Tariq had placed in my care before his death: Aquiline Osen and Razin Tanja. Named, too, though their seats were lesser ones. Alexis the Argent, the Silver Huntress, and Arthur Foundling with her. The Concocter didn't usually show to meetings like this, but the Barrow Sword did and seated himself by Vivienne. Ishaq would have been a good pick to leave out west, but I had a purpose for him here: it wasn't a coincidence I kept making him work with the Blood. The Grey Pilgrim had asked three boons of me, and I intended on seeing all of them through.

"Let's not waste time," Marshal Juniper of Callow began, voice rough. "Night's coming and we have a schedule to keep. We

received confirmation from Hierophant that the assault on Jinon is feasible, so we'll be going through with it."

Wolof was, in part, fed water by an aqueduct whose source was in the hills to the northeast of the city – the Jinon Hills. The place where the structure connected with the city walls was fortified, naturally, but so was the source in the hills that the water flowed from. A small but solid and heavily warded fortress had been raised there, over an underground basin where overflow could be directed to when heavy rains struck the aqueduct hard. There shouldn't be more than two or three hundred soldiers there but all my officers were in agreement that the fortress of Jinon – I'd yet to get a definitive answer on whether the hills were named after the fortress or the other way around – would be a nightmare to assault.

Tall and heavy walls, steep slopes all around and there was bound to be a heavy mage contingent garrisoned. We *could* take the fortress by assaulting the walls, there was no doubt about that. We had the numbers. But it would be very costly in casualties and we honestly couldn't afford that. We were already going to be starkly outnumbered in the latter parts of this campaign, throwing away lives on a hard assault would be sheer stupidity. We did need the place, though, in part to pressure Sargon and also because it was crucial to some other schemes I had in mind. Which was why I'd sat with Juniper and Pickler to plot Jinon's fall, and then sent Masego ahead to make sure what we intended was possible.

"I'll be leading that part of our offensive personally," I said. "For that purpose, I'll be taking two cohorts, our false guards and whatever warband Lady Aquiline deems fit to grant me."

Which, given how Levantine honour worked, would lead her to...

"I will go myself," Aquiline Osená replied without hesitation. "And take my slayers as retinue."

*There we go*, I thought. One of them with me to keep an eye on, and I'd pass off Razin to Hakram and the Barrow Sword.

"Good fit," I nodded, and she straightened her back some.

It was true, even if it wasn't the only reason she'd picked her most prestigious unit to take into battle with me. Levantines were surprisingly good at night work and surprise approaches, I'd found, which I really should have expected given that they spent most of their time raiding each other back in the Dominion.

"Taking Jinon will be tricky work," Juniper said. "It could go badly for us if Wolof tries a sortie at our back while it happens. Which is why we'll be drawing Sargon's attention elsewhere as that attack happens."

She tapped a finger on our map of Wolof and its outskirts, everyone's eyes following towards the west. It was the fishing villages by the shore of the Wasaliti she was indicating. Sinka, they were commonly called. There was no port proper for Wolof – nowhere near enough river trade to warrant it – so it was all very informal, with the Sahelians effectively owning one of the villages and keeping their own barges there while the rest of the villages were left in the hands of merchants and locals under the loose supervision of an appointed seneschal.

"The Sahelians no longer have a significant river fleet, courtesy of Princess Vivienne during the Liesse Rebellion," Juniper continued, which drew some laughs and cheers, "but Sinka is still a major asset to the city. It's a source of fish and lumber – they send people across to cut from the Greywood – and they import goods from further south through it. It will be a blow for them to lose the district. Fortunately, its defences are limited. General Zola, if you would?"

The dark-skinned woman cleared her throat.

"Our scouts have confirmed a garrison of around five hundred, most of them household troops," General Zola said. "The walls are mud brick and wood, and only three of the five villages have them. The barracks are reinforced, however, and built to be defended. There are also two watchtowers, so we can safely assume we will be seen approaching."

From the corner of my eye I saw Arthur leaning forward, itching to ask a question but holding himself back. Going wider, I saw incomprehension in the eyes of the Blood and even Ishaq. I raised a hand, stopping Zola before she could continue her briefing.

"Squire," I said. "Out with it."

His eyes widened for a moment, but he gathered himself quick.

"Why are you so sure we'll be seen, ma'am?" he asked the general. "It'll be under cover of dark and we have scrying countermeasures."

Ah, so that was it. I glanced at Zola, silently indicating I was going to cut in. I forgot, sometimes, that he was young. And that some of the people at this table had never truly had to consider what it would mean, going to war with Praesi.

"Aisha," I idly said, "would you please put your hand to a candle?"

A few people raised their voices to object in surprise and she gave me a dry look for the dramatics, but the tent went silent when she placed her hand over the open flame without so much as a

twitch. She drew it away after a few heartbeats, revealing to all smooth skin unmarred by burns.

"This is the Dread Empire of Praes," I flatly said. "We've gotten used to having the upper hand in sorcery, fighting out west, but leave that behind you: we're now facing the makers of all the spells we cribbed. It's in the blood here, Squire. If they don't have a spell then they'll have someone whose blood lets them see in the dark, or a monster that smells the wind, a pack of flying devils or a hundred other things. They'll see us coming, count on it. It's what they *do*."

I'd not meant it to, but I caught a certain amount of pride in the bearing of my Praesi officers after the tirade. I couldn't begrudge them that, I thought. Where you were born, is stayed with you. Good and bad. And in the end, I had not forgotten it was not only my countrymen who had joined the voices to the tune of *In Dread Crowned* when we marched on Dormer. There was a difference between hating the high lords of Praes and hating Praesi. I passed the proverbial baton back to Zola, who finished outlining what we knew of Sinka's defences as well as the plan of attack.

It was a fairly simple straightforward thrust with three thousand foot from the south, led by Vivienne but commanded by General Zola herself, with a screen of goblin skirmishers up front. Another two thousand foot, half of them Levantine and under the overall command of Razin Tanja, would move between the city and Sinka to dissuade a sortie. They'd have the two thousand horsemen of the Order of Broken Bells waiting in the wings for support. We'd keep a loose reserve of three thousand to throw at either battlefield, just in case. Afterwards it came to distributing Named, and there I took the lead again.

"The Silver Huntress will lend her skills to our skirmishers, though she will remain an independent command free to act as she sees fit," I laid out. "Squire and Apprentice will accompany Princess Vivienne, under her authority. The Barrow Sword will go with Lord Razin. The Hierophant will be accompanying me, and as usual the Concocter is not to be considered a combat asset."

Lady Alexis worked better when left alone when she wasn't the leader, I'd found. Not unlike Archer, though both would resent the comparison. As for the two young Named, this was as much about them keeping Vivienne's head on her neck as it was the other way around. Admittedly, when it came to Arthur I did have other motives. Getting him used to obeying my chosen successor was a necessary precaution, as far as I was concerned, especially now that the Jacks had established that a dynastic marriage was a dead end should he become a locus of opposition. Finding that out had been relatively simple: we'd sent one of the Jacks around his

age to make advances, he'd gently let her down by telling her he was not interested in women that way.

Adjutant had insisted I could have simply *asked*, but this was probably safer. The Squire might not easily figure out why he'd been asked the question, but he'd know people with stronger insights into Callow's politics who very much would.

"Expect surprises," Juniper gravelled, concluding the council. "We'll be surprising them too, but don't forget for the moment they had the same day to plan that we did."

I toasted to that, finally polishing the last of my wine, and to war we went.

—

I didn't like being blind, and I didn't mean in the losing-an-eye-sense.

Although, to be fair, I wasn't enamoured with that one either. What I meant, though was that I'd gotten used to being able to rely on Night to get a good view of the battlefield even as fights were happening. Unfortunately, drawing on that kind of power so close to mages of the calibre Wolof was going to field would be like unveiling a lantern in a black pit. Impossible to miss. Being robbed of that view was making me restless, though, especially since I was distinctive enough in appearance that I couldn't be on the front seat of either of the large ox-drawn wagons going up the smooth hillside path. It was pretty comfortable huddled out in the back, at least, except for the part where Masego was absolutely demolishing me at shatranj.

"How is everyone I know so good at this game?" I complained in a whisper, losing my last mage to a pin.

"I still play with Indrani regularly," Zeze informed me just as quietly. "Although you have always been terrible at this."

"I'm pretty widely known as a cunning schemer, Masego," I told him, a little affronted.

I sent a knight forward, hoping to at least make my death throes interesting. If I had to lose to him a fourth time in a row, someone was going to get killed.

"Yes," he happily acknowledged. "One who just lost her chancellor. Kingtip in three."

I cursed, and it was an awfully close thing when I decided against the cart suddenly shaking and toppling the board by happenstance. Damned thing was enchanted to stick anyway, I wouldn't be fooling anyone. The two of us were playing in the



dark, since it was as day to our common sum of exactly one meat eye. We were nestled between the kind of barrels and crates that Wolof used to send oil and foodstuffs up to Jinon, though naturally they were actually full of soldiers. Who I hoped we'd been whispering quietly enough had not all heard me getting repeatedly brutalized at shatranj by my own court wizard.

There were only twenty soldiers by wagon, since more would drag noticeably on the road, but we had more forces at hand. Some of them were even visible. Armours the Callowan treasury had kept since the Doom of Liesse had been brought out of the vaults and polished up, meaning that the thirty handpicked Soninke legionaries making up our drivers and foot escort of the wagons were in genuine Sahelian household armour. That ought to sell the illusion some, though I wouldn't be relying entirely on it. We had more forces out there in the hills, hidden. Part of it was a cohort of regulars we'd walked out of the Ways out of easy detection range and then snuck closer to the fortress, while the rest was Aquiline Osen's handpicked slayers. Two hundred of them.

Those moved around like shadows, probably the finest human sneaks I'd seen – not quite in the league of goblins, but close.

Our wagon began to slow and I cast a glance at Masego, whose eyes swivelled in their sockets. He nodded. We had arrived. As Hierophant began putting away the shatranj board I swallowed a groan of pain and began wiggling around until I had my elbows on a crate and could discreetly look out the front of the wagon. Sergeant Kadeem was a large and bulky man, enough so that I'd heard a few jokes about him being a dark-skinned orc, but he was deft with the reins. His family were travelling traders, apparently. Moving slightly to the side of him to get a better angle, I had my first close up look at the fortress of Jinon. Heavy stone blocks, I noted, granite that looked to have been fitted together without mortar.

No wonder Pickler had been adamant trebuchets wouldn't do much.

I studied the gatehouse that'd be our way in closely, as it was the key. Two squat bastions crowded a gate wide enough for a cart to pass and then some, pale yellow magelights hovering above it. There were two sets of gates, both thick wood barded with steel, but they were open: only the portcullis in front of them both was down. From above, the gatehouse rampart, I heard voices hailing us in Mthethwa. It was Captain Diara who answered them – we'd picked her because she was native to Wolof and cold-blooded by reputation – and she put irritation in her voice as she told them to hurry up so she could unload the goods and leave. Masego got closer to me and I glanced at him curiously.

"My amendment to the wards appears to be intact," Hierophant murmured.

I nodded. So far, so good. The guards above insisted there had been no planned supply run, which was true, but we'd thought ahead: Captain Diara waved around papers she informed them were proof, signed by her superior in the city. Hakram was a splendid forger and Akua had helped get the details right, should they actually bother to look at them. See, if we were infiltrating a Proceran fortress then the papers would be what they looked at. This was a Praesi fortress, though, so when the agitated guards went to get their office the man in question scoffed and ordered one of them to go tell a scrying mage to contact the city for confirmation.

This would be where the plan fell apart, if I hadn't brought Hierophant along.

We waited for some time, Masego's eyes on the sky, and eventually there was a subtle ripple of power as Hierophant **wrested** the scrying spell the slightest bit, pulling apart the magic so it failed. Thrice more they tried it, and Masego played it artfully: on the second try he let it pass through for a moment, severing the connection late. We were pretending that the city was under magical attack, that it was why the spells weren't working. Captain Diara, meanwhile, pretended to grow increasingly agitated. She asked for names, claimed she would speak to her relatives in the High Lord's service about this, cursed them for lazy incompetents. I was impressed, she was definitely getting a commendation. We'd been at this for more than half an hour now, so the officer who'd ordered scrying fell back on the tried and true method of all career soldiers: he kicked the problem up the ladder.

"Describe me the armour of the officer they went to get," I asked Masego.

He did, quietly, and my lips thinned. That was the fortress's commander, for sure. They'd not wasted time going to the top, then. The woman in question, who introduced herself to Captain Diara as Lady Semira, proved to be a calming presence. She ordered for soldiers to take position behind the portcullis and then told Diara to come forward alone with the papers proving she was truly here under orders. *So now we're putting Hakram's forgeries to the test*, I thought. Diara didn't hesitate, passing the papers before the portcullis closed anew and they were sent up to Lady Semira.

"These appear to be in order," Lady Semira said, looking down from above.

If I bent, I could make out a glimpse of her standing above. Tall and imperious, with eyes a hue between yellow and brown.

"Is there a particular reason, Captain Diara, that this run was not handled by Tabansi instead?" she asked.

I tensed.

"Didn't ask, my lady," Diara replied. "If it doesn't help me get back into bed, it's not my concern."

"So I see," Lady Semira replied, tone amused. "It will only be a moment, captain."

I breathed out. Had we gotten away with it?

"She is gesturing at soldiers," Masego told me, studying the scene with his eldritch eyes. "One just went towards the barracks. Others are being told to... head towards the gate?"

Evidently we had *not* gotten away with it. It was the second string to our bow that'd make or break this.

"Progress?" I quietly asked Hierophant.

"Not there yet," Masego replied.

Sighed. That meant there was only one thing for me to do. I cracked the side of my neck and dragged myself up.

"Signal me when the time comes," I asked him.

I dropped into the front seat next to Sergeant Kadeem, who hid his startlement well. I pulled the Mantle of Woe tight around me and went rifling through the pockets, finding my pipe with a little noise of satisfaction and unceremoniously beginning to stuff it with wakeleaf. I handed Kadeem a match and he gallantly struck it on his arm before lighting my pipe for me. Good man.

"Tell everyone to be ready to fight," I murmured around the rim. "Soon."

He froze then nodded, retreating into the back of the wagon and leaving me to pull at my pipe under the stare of the soldiers up on the rampart. I breathed in deep the of the acrid smoke, letting it sear my lungs before I spat it back out in a stream. Up there, behind the crenelation, Lady Semira was watching me through narrowed eyes as her fingers tightened around the stone until the knuckles paled. Even out east it seemed that my reputation preceded me.

"Black Queen," the commander greeted me, voice laudably even. "It seems we now dispense with the deceptions."

I shrugged.

"What was it that gave it away?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Captain Tabansi was publicly drowned last week, for having stolen Sahelian goods and sold them on the black market," Lady Semira said. "The entire garrison was made to watch."

Which, admittedly, would make it difficult to lead a supply run. Not impossible, mind you. This *was* Praes.

"That'd to it," I ruefully said.

If we'd had Scribe with us I might have heard of even a relatively minor incident like that, but I'd sent her off with Archer. It had paid off in other ways, but there were costs to everything.

"I am under orders to avoid fighting you if I can, Your Majesty," Lady Semira told me. "Your ploy was well-crafted, but it has failed. My soldiers are on the walls and my mages awake. I would invite you to withdraw, and offer my oath no attempt will be made to hinder your departure."

I smiled, because I knew something she didn't. When I'd sat with Pickler and Juniper to figure out how we might take Jinon as bloodlessly as we could, eventually we'd stumbled onto an interesting question: where did the shit go? Jinon had one source of water, and they couldn't foul it. It fed right into the aqueduct that Wolof used. So a pit under it? The fortress had existed for several centuries, though, it would have filled by now. If this were Callow it would be a matter of chamber pots and dumping them somewhere far enough the smell wouldn't reach the walls, but Wolof was *rich*. Nobles served in its garrison too, people not used to roughing it.

So instead they'd had built latrines, sophisticated little things that dumped their filth neatly outside the fortress into a series of pits.

"You're polite," I said, approvingly. "So let me make an offer back: if you and your garrison surrender, you will be treated under Callowan terms for prisoners. No mistreatment, regular meals and you'll be offered up at the first prisoner trade with your sworn lord."

It was Praesi who'd built the latrine, so of course it wasn't that simple. They were a paranoid bunch, Wastelanders. The latrines tunnels were too small for someone to crawl up and they were warded in case someone tried to send devils through instead. The Sahelians had, however, made a small mistake. I breathed in the smoke, the end of the pipe burning like a red eye in the dark, and when I breathed out I let the grey drift upwards. No wind, tonight, so it stayed around me like a crown of fumes.

"I do not deny your power, Black Queen," Lady Semira carefully said. "Yet the wards of this fortress are old and powerful. You

will not find them easy to batter down. And steel will not carry this day if your might cannot. I can only-"

A hand tapped my shoulder. Masego, giving me his signal. I smiled. I'd kept her talking long enough, baited enough soldiers to the walls.

"It's over," I interrupted. "You've lost."

Her face tightened with anger.

"Close the gates," Lady Semira ordered.

There was a long heartbeat of silence as nothing happened. Then I put fingers to my mouth and whistled, meeting her eyes. Barrels and crates cracked open, soldiers crawling out armed to the teeth, and out of the dark came marching the first of the two cohorts I'd brought. Aquiline and her slayers crept up the hill, still unseen. But the killing blow was something else entirely. There was a distant sound of cackling, and a heartbeat later the portcullis began rising to the vivid horror of the Sahelian soldiers manning the gate. The cohort of goblins I'd sent up the latrines had seized the most important room in the gatehouse, the one controlling the portcullis and gates. There would be no preventing our entry. To hammer that point home, Hierophant came out of the wagon to sit by my side and put an end to any hope of wards or sorcery stopping us.

See, the latrines were too small for *humans* to crawl up them. And the wards had been meant to stop devils going up, not goblins, because the Grey Eyries were on the other side of Praes and no Sahelian had ever had to defend this fortress against them. All it had taken to make my cohort's infiltration entirely unseen was Masego disabling the small part of the wards that would trigger an alarm if something large entered through the latrines, the kind of small detail that it would take an in-depth check of the wards to notice.

But, as this land of diabolists ought to know, the devil was in the details.

"Sleight of hand, Semira," I told my enemy, not unkindly. "If you're watching me, you're not watching where you should be."

I breathed in deep of the wakeleaf, then blew out one last breath.

"So," I said. "Are you going to surrender now, or do I need to... how did you put it again? Ah, yes."

I met her eyes with my own.

"*Batter you down*," I coldly said.

The possibility of violence hung in the air, thick as smoke, while the noblewoman weighed her chances. She eyed my forces once again, then finally grimaced.

"Jinon is yours, Black Queen," Lady Semira said.

*Well, I thought as my men began cheering, it's a small victory, but it's a start.*

## Chapter 3: Wage

*"I was privileged to receive audience with a shaman of the Red Shields clan, who after receiving gifts was willing to indulge a few of my questions. My attempts to understand the lay of her people's statecraft, however, were met with a simple laugh and the quote of a Kharsum proverb that translates as such: 'throw meat or be meat'."*

*– Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran*

Jinon fell to the Army of Callow at the price of twelve dead and five wounded.

Three wounded and two dead were of ours. One of the former was, I'd been told, a legionary from the regulars cohort who'd tripped going uphill and broken his foot. He was now being mercilessly mocked by the rest of his tenth, who had tried to get him officially commended for 'heroic injuries sustained in the line of duty'. I was giving it serious thought – laugh aside, playing along with this sort of thing tended to be good for morale. Most the corpses and wounds had taken place when my goblins infiltrated the fortress, silencing witnesses and taking the gatehouse. That left me to handle the two hundred and forty-three members of the Jinon garrison that had surrendered, a number that included seven minor nobles sworn to Wolof.

One of them was a branch Sahelian, their head mage, and she'd been trying to barricade herself in a fortified room when Hierophant came and stomped out the notion by casually wresting her sorcery away from her. I'd left him to interrogate her and gone to supervise the movement of the prisoners instead. We'd made a gate into Twilight right outside the walls and we were herding the disarmed prisoners across by groups of twenty, into the tender waiting embrace of legionaries waiting on the other side. We'd be marching them straight into a warded prison pit that Juniper had ordered dug inside our camp, where the Jacks and the phalanges would begin interrogating them for news about the state of the city.

I was now leaning against stone on the same parapet Lady Semira had stood on when we'd talked, watching it unfold as I chatted with Captain Diara.

"- moved them to a freehold in the Green Stretch as soon as I could afford it," she told me, speaking of her parents. "My brother's still out east in one of the Bassa towns, I think, but we haven't talked in years."

"I hear it's good land down in the Stretch, so long as the levees don't break," I said.

"It is, but there are dangers. People were worried it was going to be trouble when you first took the throne, Your Majesty," Captain Diara admitted. "That's passed, of course. Now they know that even if comes to steel there won't be paladins knocking at the doors for 'tithes' and pointed questions about troop movements."

The Order of the White Hand were still considered heroes, back home, tragically destroyed by my father in the first stroke of the Conquest. The freeholders of the Green Stretch had been significantly less convinced of the heroism of said paladins, not without reason. Callow had been occupied by the Dread Empire for so long it was easy to forget that the Old Kingdom hadn't been saints. It'd not been worse than most nations out there, but it'd not been any better either.

"It's the Tower my dispute is with," I said. "It's the Tower I'll settle it with."

The captain slowly nodded, expression hard to read. Whatever she might have said was not to be, as Masego strode out of the stairway with his robes sweeping behind him. He looked in a fine mood, and I could smell the scent of power still on him. He was holding magic.

"Time for me to check on my sergeants," Captain Diara tactfully said. "It was an honour, Your Majesty."

"It was *my* honour to hear you harangue those poor bastards for half an hour," I replied with a smile. "See you around, captain."

She offered a salute to Hierophant as he passed, which he returned with an absent-minded nod before coming to stand at my side.

"Got anything good?" I asked.

"Several of the ciphers the Sahelians use when scrying," Masego said. "It will be of use when intercepting their communications."

"Cutting High Lord Sargon off from Malicia would be ideal," I admitted. "It'll be easier to force his hand that way."

Malicia had soulboxed him when she'd put him on the High Seat, which meant she could effectively torture him with impunity and at will, but that was the kind of tool she wouldn't use blindly. If he wasn't contradicting an explicit order from the Tower when he surrendered his granaries to us, the ruler of Wolof was a lot more likely to fold. There wasn't a lot I could threaten him that would be worse than what Malicia could do with half an hour and an incantation.

"It will do Sapan some good to study higher order mathematics," Hierophant mused. "I'll make her work on the ciphers with me."

"Surprised she doesn't know about those already," I said. "Ashurans are famous sailors and navigation's all about numbers and stars, way I hear it."

"She meant to be a healer, so what they taught her of mathematics at that academy in Ashur was insultingly limited," Masego said, sounding peeved. "Sabrathan sorcery encourages specialization, Catherine, as the knowledge overlap between its different disciplines is supposedly very limited."

I hummed in understanding. For all that Hierophant had always rather looked down on the sorcery the Thalassocracy of Ashur practiced, what I'd heard of it was rather impressive. They had finer healing mages than the Praesi and they could whip up winds and storms out of blue sky. Sabrathan magic did seem to have pretty stark limits on what could be done well with it, though, so I wasn't surprised Masego held it in such low esteem. He'd been raised to treat magic as something more than just a tool, a philosophical quest for the truth of Creation. There was little chance of him respecting people who, in his eyes, willingly chose to cripple themselves before even beginning that quest.

"Tell me how it pans out," I shrugged. "I'm curious how much she'll take to your teachings."

I was more curious if she was going to end up a long-term threat to people or places I cared about, to be honest, but Zeze enjoyed talking about his pupil and I enjoyed indulging him. While Masego cordially disliked teaching large groups, the way he had when I'd asked him to make my Legion and later Army cadres into mages capable of battlefield ritual magic, he seemed to be relishing teaching a single highly skilled pupil. It was the kind of teaching he was likely most familiar with, I'd eventually realized. Just like Warlock had done with him.

"I will," he assured me. "Though none of this is why I came. You earlier mentioned intending to scry Juniper for news of how her



warring went. Shall we, before I must release the magic I wrested?"

I'd actually figured it would be one of our mages I relied on for that, but if Zeze was volunteering I wasn't going to complain. And if this marked yet another instance of him keeping someone's magic in his hands just a little longer than was strictly necessary, well, part of loving someone was knowing when you needed to avert your eye.

"Please do," I replied.

It didn't take long to get a hold of my marshal even though the night's action was far from over, as she'd been expecting me. After the fortress was invested one of our mages had sent word that things had gone well, but not gotten much in exchange: the offensive had still been happening. After a few moments Aisha's face appeared in the mirror-like circle of magic that Masego had drawn in the air, offering me a smile before disappearing and being replaced with the Hellhound's thicker features.

"Warlord," she greeted me.

"Marshal," I replied. "How did the attack go?"

"We hold Sinka," Juniper said. "The garrison in the villages began to retreat after skirmishing against our vanguard and we caught fewer than fifty of them. We didn't get any trouble out of the people themselves, the seneschal fled after leaving orders to surrender without violence."

Huh. That was unusually caring, by Praesi standards. Most Wasteland nobles would have sent their people into the grinder without a second thought, thinking a few of my soldiers killed a fair trade for bleeding the populace of a port they no longer held. High Lord Sargon's orders, or the small rebellion of a decent man in a bad position? Hard to know.

"Any moves from Wolof?"

"They tried a sortie," Juniper acknowledged. "Two thousand household troops, with mage support and about a hundred *walin-falme* for vanguard. They hit our screening force head on and withdrew when the Order flanked them. They sacrificed the devils to eat the charge and retreated into the city."

"That looks like a straightforward blunder," I frowned. "Only two thousand? It's a large chunk of their forces, but they have to know we'd eat that on the field. Especially when we have cavalry and they don't."

My marshal looked pleased, licking her fangs in approbation.

"It was a pin," Juniper said. "They were tying down our screening force while they hit the men I sent to take Sinka. They waited until after the surrender, when we'd begun to split the force into the smaller garrisons we'll be leaving."

My brow rose. That implied they'd managed a night ambush on open grounds while we fielded goblins.

"They had illusions good enough we couldn't see through them?" I asked.

"The attackers were in the river," Juniper grimaced. "Deep enough our first sweep with mages didn't catch them. They had boats hidden on the far side of the Wasaliti under illusions and some kind of half-fish devil in the-"

She turned a moment, leaning towards someone I only dimly heard speak before nodding thanks.

"Sahelian sends word the devils are called *nikyana*, and that Wolof usually keeps a few contracts but nowhere as many as we saw tonight," the tall orc growled. "At least seven hundred of the bastards popped out of the river on our flanks and they would have caught us entirely by surprise without the Silver Huntress giving alarm. They don't use weapons but they're quick and strong, we lost almost a full cohort before we realized what was happening."

I winced. Caught out of formation, my legionaries would have had a hard time handling devils. Like with heavy horse, you needed thick ranks and spellfire to handle a charge of those.

"And bleeding us wasn't even the point of the attack," Juniper revealed.

My brow rose.

"They infiltrated a mage cadre with escorts to try to grab Vivienne in the chaos," Juniper said. "The Squire and the Apprentice drove them off, but apparently it was a close thing. The moment the grab failed the entire attack was called off and they retreated into the river."

I let out a low whistle. That'd actually been a sharp play from Sargon, assuming it really was the young lord's plan. Vivienne was one of the few people in my army I couldn't afford not to bargain for, if she were taken prisoner. Should Sargon threaten to put her head on a pike unless I retreated, he would have me in a very tricky position.

"Total casualties?" I asked.

"Between Sinka and the plain, we lost three hundred and twelve," she said. "Cost them at least two hundred where Tanja held command on top of the forty and so we captured, so there's that, but they're keeping to standard Praesi tactics when it comes to soaking up casualties with devils."

Forty years ago, before the Reforms, orcs and goblins would have been right with the devils eating those Callowan blades, I thought. Bleeding so that their *bettors* wouldn't. Looking at the hard cast of my marshal's face, I suspected I wasn't the only one who'd thought that. I quickly went over the fall of Jinon for her and concluded with the prisoners now headed her way.

"Good news," Juniper said. "I have mages and the Huntress following the diabolists on the river. We'll try to hit them before they can retreat to Wolof."

"Take prisoners if you can," I said, "but our people come first."

I wanted diabolists, but I didn't need them *that* badly. A handful grabbed off the field weren't going to be enough to handle the Hellgates, I was going to need a genuine diplomatic concession to secure that many. Juniper nodded, offering me a crisp Legion salute before the spell died and the magic displaying her face dissipated. I rolled my shoulder, sighing. It was already a long night and it was still far from over. I turned to Masego.

"Assuming the prisoners are out, I'll need to help establish our own garrison here," I said. "Do you think you could check the wards for nasty surprises?"

The Concocter would be coming along later too, to see if my idea about how get into the city was feasible.

"I will," Hierophant said, burning eyes swivelling lazily in their sockets, "but I expect you'll have more pressing matters to attend to."

"Like?"

"Aunt Eudokia just walked through the gates," Masego said, "and she looks in a hurry."

—

Scribe looked both healthier than when I'd last seen her and deeply exhausted. It was the good kind of exhausted, though, the kind you got from putting all of yourself into something you loved. Her back was straight and though as always my attention slid right off her — save for the same detail, the perennially ink-stained hands — I got a sense of vitality from her that she'd lacked when she had first reached out to me in Hainaut. I had come to believe that, more than anything, Scribe thrived on being

useful. The cause didn't matter much, it was about stretching her abilities to the limit. In a way it was like Ranger's thirst for worthy fights, though neither woman would thank me for the comparison.

"Queen Catherine," she greeted me, shortly bowing.

"Scribe," I replied. "Pleasure to have you back with us, though I expected it would be back at the camp."

"There has been a change of plans," she said. "The envoys heard there would be an assault on Jinon, and they insisted on speaking with you here."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"They want to see if I'm strong enough to beard the Sahelians in their own backyard," I said.

Which was fair enough. Nobody liked backing a losing horse. Besides, orcs respected strength above all and this bunch was more opportunistic than most.

"How long until they're here?" I asked.

"A quarter hour at most," Scribe said. "I requested of Archer that she slow their passage through the Ways, but there are limits."

"She'll do what she can," I muttered.

My mind was already racing ahead, putting the pieces in place. I would have preferred having Vivienne here for this, since any deals made would be inherited by her, but that'd be hard to arrange. This wouldn't end with a single conversation anyway.

"Indeed," Scribe said. "A stark improvement on her predecessor in every regard, Archer."

I eyed the villainess amusedly. She'd been less than fond of Ranger even *before* the Lady of the Lake had put an arrow an inch away from her heart.

"Thanks for the heads up," I said.

"There is more," Scribe said. "I received word from my agents in the northeast: the fortress of Chagoro has fallen."

I took me a moment to place that name in my mental map of Praes. It was one of the main fortresses north of the High Seat of Okoro, an important strategic position since it was close to the two easiest passes into the Northern Steppes. It was the keystone of Okoro's northern defences, and supposedly one of the thornier fortresses in the region.

"Who holds it?" I frowned. "It is one of the Clans?"

High Lord Jaheem Niri was one of Malicia's supporters and his domain has been largely spared the depredations that most of Praes had suffered, so this was something of a surprise. The Niri could still field one of the largest private fighting forces in the Empire, and they wouldn't skimp on their northern defences when there was trouble in the Steppes. A surprise attack by supporters of Sepulchral, maybe?

"No one holds it," Scribe evenly said. "It is full of corpses."

My thoughts ground to a halt. What?

"My agents confirmed that the killing was done by blade, over the span of less than an hour, and that the assailants took no casualties," she continued.

"That's absurd," I bit out. "How many soldiers were there in that fortress, Scribe?"

"A little over a thousand," she replied.

"It can't be the Dead King," I frowned, "he's bound by oath to attack neither Praes nor Callow. Who could-"

I closed my eyes, abandoning the train of thought. It was a dead end, there were too many monsters out there in the wilds that I knew little about. Capacity for destruction, for killing, was not that uncommon. It would instead be much more useful to figure out who gained from Chagoro falling. I did, since it made Okoro a lot more vulnerable to attacks by the Clans, but this hadn't been a scheme of mine. Sepulchral benefitted as well, arguably, since anything weakening a backer of Malicia's helped her cause. She shouldn't have assets capable of something this flashy, though. Could the Empress herself have done it? She certainly had the ruthlessness, but I wasn't seeing a gain for her to make. Even if Jaheem Niri had been about to turn on her and she wanted him kept busy, there were better ways.

And this timing, I thought, it was *too* good.

I wanted to bring the Clans into the war, specifically for them to fall on the back of Malicia's northern allies, and the High Lord of Okoro had been a major obstacle in that regard. With a major gap in his defences, however, there were now chances that orc clans would go raiding even if it had nothing to do with me whatsoever. And it was coming at a precisely the right time, while I was mauling Wolof with the Army of Callow and Malicia's armies were still making their way up from down south. Okoro stood alone and with its pants down. That wasn't a coincidence, it was too precise for that, and-

"Black," I murmured. "*Black* did this."

"Ranger is powerful, but not so powerful as that," Scribe objected.

He shouldn't have the resources to pull off something like this, that much was true. It was pretty much just him and the Lady of the Lake out there, wasn't it? He'd not even picked up that nice army of deserters waiting for him in the Green Stretch – though I had my doubts about that, it seemed a little too convenient – and taken them in hand. Archer and Akua had believed, I recalled from the last time we'd discussed the matter in council, that he *couldn't* take up such a position. It would be a death trap to be visible, since Ranger was being hunted by the Emerald Swords. My thoughts stalled for a moment after that, as the realization sunk in, because surely he hadn't.

It was the kind of reckless play I would have made, nothing like the calculating and cold-blooded man who'd taught me. And yet.

"Eudokia," I quietly said. "Your agents, they said it was done with blades. Did they get a read on the number of assailants?"

"No," Scribe admitted. "All they could give me was that it looked like halfway through the fight soldiers began fleeing and they were run down to the last."

And that wasn't much, wasn't a confirmation, but it fit.

"Fuck me," I said. "He used Ranger as *bait*, Scribe. The Emerald Swords did this. He drew them there to clear out the fortress."

She blinked in surprise, then after a long moment sighed. Tellingly, she did not disagree. Silly me, how could I not have expected my father would find a way to turn his sole companion being hunted by ten of the most dangerous people on Calernia into an *advantage*. I'd come by my bastardry honestly, I shouldn't have forgot. And against my better judgement, I found my lips twitching. *Welcome to the war, Black. Finally making your move, are you?*

"So he wants the Clans going on the offensive too," I mused. "Interesting."

What exactly my father wanted and how he intended to achieve remained unclear to me, and likely would for some time. If he'd wanted to speak with me, he would have by now. I cast a look at Scribe, who had remained silent as I thought.

"If you offered your services again," I said, "I'm not sure he would refuse you a second time."

I was under no illusions that our months of collaboration in any way trumped decades of close friendship. The Calamities had been tightly bound, before they began dropping dead.

"You worry of my loyalties," Scribe said.

"I don't," I said. "I know exactly where they lie. And it's not empty words when I say that there would be no rancour, should you-"

"I am not a good or pleasant woman, Catherine Foundling," Eudokia the Scribe said and for a heartbeat I saw brown eyes flashing with anger, set in a tanned and freckled face. "I do not pretend otherwise. I have little use for the morals you espouse or the causes you champion, save when they intersect with my own diversions."

"But," I said.

"But I am a woman of my word," Scribe said. "I believe in contracts and the worth of promises. Even should I decide to leave your side – and if I do it will not be like *this*, like some beaten dog crawling back to her master's feet – even then, I would no more reveal secrets learned in your service than I have revealed you those I learned in his."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. How much of that had been truth and how much of it a lie? It was the proportions that made the difference between poison and medicine.

I was going to be betrayed at least once before the month was out, but would Scribe make the second?

"I believe you," I lied, and we prepared for our guests.

—

Sometimes diplomacy was about making a point.

That was why, when five orcs passed through the gates of Jinon following Indrani, they stopped and stared at the sight awaiting them for a beat. It was not the throne that caught their eye, though shaping it out of roiling Night had lent it a certain imperious look. It wasn't the deadwood staff across my knees either, or crow-shaped shadows perched above my shoulders. It was the piles of arms and armour that filled the courtyard, glittering and ornate Praesi armaments spread around like a carpet of steel. Hundreds of swords and shields, of cuirasses and helmets, and not a corpse anywhere around to be seen. Only steel and silence, with the moon high above and dark walls around us.

That was my point: *I took this fortress, and I did not even bleed for it.*

Archer was hiding a smile as she walked to us through the path. I had a small honour guard around me, a simple line of regulars, and though Hierophant was somewhere above on a parapet it was Scribe who stood behind me on my left. There were five seats awaiting, for the five orcs that the clans I'd reached out to had sent. Scribe whispered the names into my ear even as they approached, their body language wary. Asny of the Graven Bone Clan, taller than even Hakram and sister to her clan's chief. Valborg of the Stag-Crowned Clan, stooped but strong and eldest raid leader of the Stag-Crowned. Skarod Longaxe, the small but nimble husband to the chieftain of the Blackspear Clan. The twins Sigvin and Sigvun of the Split Tree Clan were the last, rumoured to both be shamans and shapeshifters.

It was the clan I needed on my side the least that'd sent two envoys, ironically enough. The Blackspears, the Graven Bone and the Stag-Crowned were the three largest southern clans, but that wasn't actually why I'd reached out to them. I had decent relations with the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves – Juniper and Hakram's clans – and they were among the great orc powers too. No, those three were here because Malicia had raised them over other orcs by ennobling their chiefs as Lords of the Steppe and empowering them to collect tribute on behalf of the Tower. The Split Tree twins, on the other hand, were here for slightly more complicated reasons.

Their clan was respected and well-connected, boasting a number of genuine spellcaster shamans, and it'd made the Split Tree Clan an important part of the alliance that'd formed around the Lords of the Steppes. Those three clans had... mixed reputations. The Split Tree being part of the alliance lent it respect it badly needed, considering when the Howling Wolves – currently the largest and most well-respected of the clans – were at the head of the alliance opposing the Lords of the Steppe. For me that meant having them on board was much to be preferred, if a bargain was to happen, but they weren't strictly required. Archer left their side after offering me a grin, coming to stand at my right. As the orcs approached a legionary came forward with a plate holding a large cut of salted pork and a mug of beer.

"I offer you meat and drink from my table," I spoke in Kharsum.

They each took a bite and a sip – I noted that the Blackspear envoy, Skarod Longaxe, went first – and only then did the wariness leave them. I'd just formally given them my hospitality, and though the custom was not as ironclad with orcs as it was with Taghreb it wasn't something to lightly cross.

"Good, we're done with the shite then," Asny of the Graven Bones grunted, spitting to the side. "Hail, Black Queen."

"Hail, Asny of the Graven Bones," I replied, faintly amused. "And to you all."



It got growls in answer, rough acknowledgement.

"You wanted to have talks, Black Queen," Skarod Longaxe said.  
"Talk, then. You're not the only one with a war on."

"That one's her war too, unless she's stopped trading weapons to our enemies," Valborg of the Stag-Crowned peevishly said.

I hadn't. Hakram's revision of the proposal that'd troubled me so much had proved viable in arming the clans we wanted armed in the Steppes. We'd taken to buying *dwarven* weapons through Mercantis, which while relatively low-quality were cheap and came in large crates. We traded them to friendly clans in the north for amber, furs and raw iron ore – which we then traded back to Mercantis at a mark up, making a small but tidy profit. We could sustain that trade route for years, considering Callow had nowhere enough trading barges to flood either market to the extent that prices would lower. The kind of diplomatic flourishes I'd gotten used to trotting out in Procer would be useless here, so instead I leaned into my natural instinct.

"You hitched your chariot to a dying horse," I bluntly told them.  
"It's time to cut loose before it drags you down with it."

Asny barked out a laugh.

"You've got guts, Queen, I'll give you that," she said. "But it's a little soon to make that claim, yeah? Tower's still standing."

"There are many who have fought Dread Empress Malicia, over the years," Sigvin of the Split Tree said, voice soft for all that she was built like barn door. "Some even had the better of her, for a time. None still remain."

I smiled at them, all teeth and malice.

"If my armies are at the gates of Ater, what use do I have for any of you?" I said. "When the Tower falls – and it will – what reason do I have to care about your enemies butchering every last one of you? If you're of no use to me, you're meat. Now is when you earn your worth."

Skarod Longaxe, envoy for the Blackspears, spat to the side on some soldier's shield.

"So you want us to kneel to your little favourites," he said.  
"Which will you crown, Black Queen, the Howling Wolves or the Red Shields?"

He bared his teeth, contemptuous.

"Will you make one of your servants chief first, just to tie it up neat?" he mocked. "Your own little puppet king in the Steppes, ready to do your bidding."

"Fuck that," Asny of the Graven Bones growled. "We're too many corpses deep in this feud to roll over for the Wolves."

"Little has been offered," Sigvun of the Split Tree Clan mildly said. "Much has been demanded."

I drummed fingers against the arm of my throne.

"Did I ever speak of surrendering to anyone?" I asked, irritated. "The next person to put words in my mouth will be made to swallow them."

"We're under hospitality," Skarod Longaxe harshly said.

"Hospitality keeps you your life, Longaxe, not your teeth," I replied.

Asny and Valborg laughed, though the twins looked unamused.

"Are these talks not meant to broke peace between us and the Howling Wolves, then?" Sigvin of the Split Tree asked.

"I'm here to broker a war," I said. "If you want to make peace with the Wolves, make peace with the Wolves. It's the business of the Clans, not Callow."

I stared them down from my throne, the crows stirring at my shoulders. The attention of the Sisters was not in the shards, leaving them as little more than creatures of shadow, but they still made an intimidating sight.

"What I want to know," I said, "is why you're fighting other orcs for snow and grass when you could be biting deep in the riches of Okoro instead."

"We didn't choose to feud," Skarod Longaxe snorted. "The Wolves did."

Bullshit. The Blackspears had wasted no time in using the powers Malicia granted them to try to extort all their neighbouring clans, they'd known it would come to war. They'd just figured they were going to win it.

"Okoro's belly is well-guarded," Sigvun of the Split Tree pointed out. "Much of its armies have remained north, its walls are tall and its devils many."

"We could take them," Asny of the Graven Bones scoffed. "If we didn't have to keep half our warriors home to fight off raids, we could smash through Okoro."

"The only thing you'd smash in Okoro is your skull on Chagoro's walls, pup," Valborg of the Stag-Crowned dismissed. "That fortress has broken more warbands than you've had lays."

"Chagoro," I calmly said, "has fallen."

Five pairs of eyes went to me, stillness hanging in the air like haze.

"There is nothing left between those walls save corpses," I said. "Do I now have your attention?"

"You lie," Skarod Longaxe accused.

I glanced at Scribe, who took a single step forward.

"It is the truth," she said. "My agents have confirmed it."

That took the wind out of Longaxe's sails. The Calamities weren't necessarily loved by orcs, but they were *respected*. Scribe putting her weight behind this wasn't something they'd dismiss. Hells, it was the reason I'd sent her with Archer into the Steppes in the first place. Indrani wasn't known up there, but the Calamities? That name still turned heads, even with most of them in the ground. It'd made them take me seriously enough to send envoys in the first place.

"That changes things," Valborg of the Stag-Crowned admitted, clicking her fangs in hesitation. "Without Chagoro in the way, we could make it past the fortress-lands."

"We can't mount a raid worth a goat's spit with the Wolves up our asses," Asny of the Graven Bones said.

"Okoro's wealth isn't worth kneeling to our enemies," Skarod Longaxe said, but his tone was more careful now.

Less hostile, I decided. He still didn't think much of me or my offer, but the thought of raiding Okoro's holdings appealed. As I'd thought it might.

"Offer truce," I said. "If you do, I will back you under threat of ending sale of arms."

"Truce isn't peace, but it won't be easy to swallow," Asny growled.

"Fight for a thousand years, for all I care," I snorted. "But do it *rich*. Do it with great herds of cattle, with granaries of grains and the wealth of a hundred tributes. Do it wielding enchanted blades. You think you're the only ones who want to sink their teeth there? How many warriors from the Shields and the Wolves do you think would rather raid south than fight *you*?"

That was why I was sitting with these five instead of clans I could more easily have made allies of, in the end. I could back those friendly clans all I wanted, but it wouldn't *cost* Malicia anything. What did she care that there was a civil war in the

Steppes, so long as it didn't spill over anywhere that mattered to her? It wouldn't conclude quickly enough to be a threat. I actually suspected she'd meant her raising of the Lords of the Steppes to trigger that very civil war, since if the orcs were fighting each other they weren't making trouble for her. She'd picked clans with bad reputations to raise, too, and that didn't look like a coincidence to me. They were the same clans that were almost guaranteed to have gone raiding at her unprotected back, were they not busy defending their noble titles.

If I turned these, though, not only would the betrayal be a public slap in her face but close to the full might of the Clans would come into play in the greater Praesi civil war.

"And if this truce was sought by your alliance," Sigvun of the Split Tree said, "you would support it?"

"I'll even send an envoy at the talks," I smiled, hiding my triumph.

I said it like it was a concession. Like it wasn't what I'd been after from the start. Like the moment the rest of them began to agree, as they hesitantly did, I'd not gotten exactly what I wanted: an army that, though it didn't know it yet, was going to march on Keter with the rest of us.

Now I just needed to figure out why my father had wanted this too, and if the two of us were at war too.

## Chapter 4: Stock

*"It is unseemly to poison an ally in the first month, wear white at an assassination or use the same curse more than once per decade. Fashions will change with year and season, but always these three will be a mark of crudeness."*

*– Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian*

The way Indrani and I kept sharing a bed was the longest I'd ever been involved with anyone.

It wasn't a love affair, at least not in the sense that I was in love with her or the other way around, but it was no less meaningful for it. More than that, it'd become a creature comfort of sorts on top of being very enjoyable. My part of the arrangement was probably the easiest to navigate, which honesty compelled me to admit might be for the best considering how things had ended with Killian. My time with my former Senior Mage had ended with frozen silence and avoiding each other, which didn't bode well since aside from the occasional tumble before I

became the Squire that was pretty much the sum of my relationships. Indrani didn't ask much aside from a place in my bed, which was just fine by me. That much I could handle.

It was what bound her and Masego that I found interestingly nuanced. The two of them were distinctly 'involved', but it was more an intimate partnership than anything like the chaste marriages people without inclination to sex sometimes entered in. Masego wasn't inclined towards that either. Zeze seemed happy with the arrangement, anyhow, and Indrani certainly was. While she'd let him set the lines, aware he hadn't been made of quite the same clay than she and I in this regard, she'd not been afraid to speak up when she wanted something. It was how they'd come to share rooms in the Arsenal. Masego also considered anything she and I got up to as not related to him in the slightest, I'd confirmed on the one awkward instance where I'd tried to broach the subject with him.

He'd been confused at my bringing it up in the first place, since it struck him as a private affair, and once I'd made sure he was both aware and indifferent I'd been more than happy to drop the matter entirely. It'd been a relief. I didn't count myself as particularly shy, but as I aged I'd noticed that I was getting more closed up about intimacy. There were just too many ways it could be used against me if it came to light.

Indrani's part of this that was the trickiest. She was the one who had to draw lines and figure out limits. Distinctions. It was in the small things, like the way that after returning from a long trip, as she had yesterday, she always spent the night with Masego. She'd also been out in the wilds for about two months, though, so pretty early the morning after she came to visit me and I strengthened the privacy protections around my tent with Night. Quite a while later, we had a breakfast together. I was seated at the end of the table on my favourite seat, picking at the plate of sliced fruit my attendants had brought in and occasionally passing Indrani a cut of mango or passion fruit while I read through the papers Adjutant had sent me.

High Lord Sargon had sent a messenger to arrange talks, much as we'd expected he would, and they'd been set for midday on relatively neutral grounds. The envoys from the Steppes were settled in, I read, and soon we'd have the second round of talks so we had all the details hashed out before they left. Hakram would have to be there for those, as I fully intended for him to be my envoy up north.

Indrani was sitting cross-legged on the ground, absent-mindedly munching on the pieces I put on a plate in hand's reach as we chatted and she carved at the underside of the table. I was careful with my sleeves as I devoured the mango – one of the few sweet things I liked, and so rare back home – since the green

tunic I'd put on had long ones. It was a little warm for this weather, but I didn't feel like having to explain the slight rope burn around my wrists should someone see it. Especially when the reasons for it had me in such a boneless, lazy mood. It was a rare enough these days, I wasn't going to spoil it.

"So the two ducklings you picked up," Indrani began, knife chipping away out of my sight.

I finished a piece of passion fruit, licking my fingers clean.

"Sadly," I slowly replied, "you're going to have to be more specific than that."

She snorted.

"Really living up to that whole Queen of Lost and Found title, huh?" Indrani said.

I rolled my eye at her.

"Which ones do you mean?"

"Razin and Aquiline, the duckling lords," Archer elaborated.

"What about them?" I said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Shouldn't they be married by now?" Indrani said, then clicked her tongue.

She dipped deeper under the table, knifepoint scratching against the wood furiously. Missed a detail, had she? I pushed a few more slices of fruit onto her plate and slid it across the table closer to her.

"They're going through with it after we take Keter," I informed her.

"Bold," Archer said, tone approving.

Actually very cautious of them, and so likely Razin's idea. He tended to be better at that part. If they got married right now, they'd be a power bloc that the other two great lines of the Blood – the Champion's and the Brigand's – would feel strongly threatened by. With the Pilgrim's Blood gone the way of dust, the Dominion no longer had an even theoretical ruler. Which meant after the war Levant would either fracture into smaller warring fiefdoms or another bloodline would take the Tattered Throne. An alliance between the Osenia and the Tanja would be the clear frontrunner in the race, always a dangerous position to be in. As things stood, though, Lord Yannu and Lady Itima were a lot more likely to bet on one of them biting it in the war than try a knife in the back.

Why take the risk, when the Dead King might yet do the work for them?

"It'll make for a damn good story, if they pull it off," I admitted.

It was the kind of foundation a dynasty could be built on if they played it right. Indrani made an approving noise.

"You ever wonder what stories they'll tell about us?" she asked, tone light.

"Probably that fucking story about me castrating an ogre," I grimly said. "That one'll follow me into grave, mark my words."

"Don't undersell yourself," Archer said, and I heard the grin.

There was a beat of silence.

"You castrated him in *single combat*," she said. "That makes it all the more impressive."

I groaned, making an obscene gesture she didn't even bother to look at.

"Our jaunt to Keter's going to make a good one, I think," Indrani mused. "It's got all the good ingredients. The five of us and Akua, a journey into the Hells and the worthy enemies."

Metaphorical Hells, since it'd been Arcadia we traipsed through. Hopefully chroniclers wouldn't ask too many questions about the plan in Keter. I'd yet to live it down, though in my defence it had sort of worked?

"The Princess of High Noon," I suggested. "That was a good one for retelling. Masego found his eyes and all five of us had a hand in that win."

It'd ended on a sour note, but that was war for you.

"Still can't believe Vivienne didn't even try to pawn that sun," Archer grumbled. "What kind of a thief was she? It would have fetched us a fortune in Mercantis."

"I think in a way she did," I said. "It's on her personal arms now, did you know?"

A white sun on Fairfax blue. If there was to be a Dartwick dynasty after me, I figured they were as good arms as any.

"My sources informed me," Indrani mysteriously said.

The effect was somewhat spoiled by the way she groped blindly above the table to steal a few pieces of fruit I'd laid out to

scarf them down noisily. Well, that and we both knew that by sources she just meant Hakram. The gossipy bitch.

"After Zeze pulled out that echo of the sun in Hainaut, people started telling the story again," I mused. "Pretty sure it's spreading quicker than it naturally should, too."

Indrani's head popped over the edge of the table, brown face openly curious.

"Hakram's building her a legend?" she asked.

"He probably is," I said, "but I don't think it's entirely *natural*, if you catch my drift."

Names could form in a lot of ways, but one was the most common: like a boulder rolling downhill, gathering weight and momentum. In that moment in Hainaut, when the hour had been at its darkest and she'd ridden out to turn the tide, I believed Vivienne had sown the first seeds of a Name. I had mixed feelings about that, to be honest. It would be the final nail in my hopes of having the Liesse Accord ban Named rulers, should my guess turned out accurate. But if I was going to trust anyone Named with my home, it'd be Vivienne Dartwick. *And the chances of that measure going through are getting slimmer by the day, so I might just have to water my wine there.*

"I did notice people called her a princess even before you made that official," Indrani said. "But it can be a thin line between the start of a Name and simple reputation."

I grunted in agreement.

"Pretty sure I'm standing in its way, whatever it is," I admitted. "I think it'll only coalesce properly when she's got the crown."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Archer said. "You're looking at Names and Roles of Old Callow, and sure enough she doesn't fit those properly, but if you go *simpler*-"

A guard popped in his head through the tent's flap, and I realized with mild embarrassment I'd never loosened the Night-workings I'd put around the tent. I wouldn't even have heard it if there was a hurricane outside.

"The Concocter to speak with you, Your Majesty," the legionary said.

Ah, good. She'd finished her tests then.

"Let her in," I replied.



The Concocter's appearance had changed since she'd accompanied us to Praes, which I'd been told was a regular occurrence with her. Her hair was now aquamarine blue, pulled up in a bun behind her head, with matching lips and golden-yellow eyes. Though often sullen, for once the alchemist seemed in a pleasant mood. She offered me half a bow and Indrani simply a droll look, which Archer returned with an indolent wave of her hand before helping herself to the rest of the fruit.

"Your Majesty," the Concocter greeted me.

"Concocter," I replied. "You have results for me?"

"I do," she said. "Of the three products we salvaged from Sudden Abjuration before shutting it down, two proved functional in the water of the aqueduct. The amaranthine salt rock dispersed too easily, however, so I would recommend the use of the evanescent powder instead."

I pushed down a grimace. The salt rock would have been easier to carry and less would have been needed, but I wasn't going to be taking risks with this. Well, not more than the plan involved in the first place anyway. It, uh, wouldn't be the safest thing I'd ever done.

"How many bags of powder will be necessary?" I asked.

"At least eight, standard Arsenal measurements," the Concocter said after a moment, calculating in her head. "Assuming the dimensions given by Lady Sahelian are accurate."

"They should be," I said. "Just in case, I'd request you make us ten bags. Better to have a margin of error."

"It can be done by tomorrow morning, if I don't sleep," the villainess replied, sounding almost enthusiastic at the thought. "As for the breathing potions they're already done. Four doses, as you asked."

Good, it was all coming together. Indrani let out a noise of surprise.

"The underwater breathing brew, you actually got it working?" she asked.

"I did," the Concocter preened.

"Damn," Archer said, sounding impressed. "It's been what, over ten years? Congratulations. What was missing?"

The Concocter cleared her throat, seemingly embarrassed. I could understand why.

"Powdered dragon bone," she said.

Which made each of those four vials she'd brewed me worth more than their literal weight in gold. My pipe was dragonbone, and that little artefact alone would be enough to buy you a large mansion in Ater. Thankfully, at least part of the bill for this was being covered by the Grand Alliance. Indrani laughed at the answer and the Concocter subtly tensed.

"Yeah, not a lot of that going around Refuge," Archer said. "Makes sense you wouldn't have figured it out there."

"I'd had good results with drake blood, it was a hint," Concocter admitted. "Mind you, those pigs still drowned."

The tension in her shoulders loosened, and I wondered if Indrani realized how precarious the entente she'd reached there still was. Having the Silver Huntress in camp had been as much a help as hindrance there. Cocky and Alexis tended to argue when left to their own devices, and the Concocter then often sought out Indrani, but the Silver Huntress was openly resentful of that and it was leading to friction between the three – Archer wasn't the kind of woman who took kindly to being snipped at when she didn't believe she deserved it.

"Encouraging," I drily said, and she looked a little embarrassed for a moment.

"It'll work, Your Majesty, I tested it myself," the Concocter said.

"Your work has given me no reason to doubt you," I calmly said. "Kindly send me word as soon as you've finished preparing the powder."

The other villain understood it as the dismissal it was, and after the usual round of courtesies she was on her way out. I'd kept Indrani's attention, though. I'd figured mention of the water breathing potion would do the trick.

"So, I see you've got plans," Archer said. "Going somewhere, Cat?"

"I am," I said. "And taking people with me, too."

"Oh?" Indrani said, with transparently affected nonchalance.

The potion would be a new experience, something she craved like a drunkard craved the bottle, and on top of that she knew I wouldn't be mauling my treasury paying for those for just any old place. I was going somewhere interesting, and she wanted in. Which made it good thing I'd planned to bring her from the start. While I could have teased her and strung this out, I decided to reward her having interacted with a fellow pupil of Ranger without anyone getting angry or bitter.

I was going to train it into her, I swore.

"Hey," I asked with a winning smile, "wanna to come with me and Akua to rob a secret Sahelian vault full of horrors beyond comprehension?"

She choked in surprise and delight, hazelnut eyes alight with pleasure.

"You say the sweetest things sometimes," Indrani grinned.

—

There was no one in the world like the Soninke and their highborn gloried in that.

Our party had come to the orchard first so that we would be able to look for traps before High Lord Sargon arrived. Hierophant led a mage cadre in combing through the spread of tall lemon trees, boots crinkling against the dry earth as the sun pounded down on all our heads. There was not so much as a hint of breeze today, the heat was suffocating. We'd agreed on bringing no more than thirty guards each, so twenty knights of the Order of Broken Bells sat the saddle in good order behind me. Inside those shells of polished and hymn-inscribed steel they must be cooking alive, but they made for an impressive sight. Decked in plate from head to toe, their chargers wearing carapace in black and bronze, they kept their shields close and their lances raised. Their banner hung by my own, dead for the lack of wind.

Masego had wandered off to sit under a tree after looking around, popping open a book larger than my head in what looked like an older dialect of Mthethwa, which left Akua and I to stand under the shade of a tall lemon tree halfway through the orchard. She had decided to wear my colours, today. The dress was a long one, going down to her feet, and it was of a traditional Wolof cut: the neckline was narrow and though it went beyond her collarbone it did not venture far. It clung loosely to her body, tied up at the waist by two sleeves of cloth that were part of the dress. It was black, though from the top of her collarbones to well below her thigh there was broad silver-and-gold embroidery. It looked almost like a stole, though it was part of the dress, and the intricate patterns there matched those at the end of her sleeves and the cloth tied around her waist.

There was, as had become her habit, not a single piece of jewelry on her.

Stunning as she was, I might as well have worn rags for the difference it'd make. Still, I'd humoured the notion of royal splendour: though I wore a breastplate and greaves, because I wasn't a fool, I'd put my hair in a long braid and worn my crown. The Mantle of Woe and my staff served as the regalia of my rule,

truer to me than anything I might have dragged out of some dusty Fairfax vault, and instead of an aketon I had worn a thick black tunic touched with silverwork around the edges. Nothing as intricate as what Akua had on her, but then my bloody clothing wasn't made out thin air. We made a memorable enough sight, I figured, and drew the eye enough that the little surprise I'd kept up my sleeve shouldn't be noticed.

Then Sargon Sahelian's party came riding into the orchard, and it was an effort not to stare.

All thirty of the high lord's bodyguards were mounted on pale horses, a breed short-backed with a high-set tail, but little of the coat could be seen: long quilted armour in red, black and white covered them all the way down to the lower leg. The patterns were eye-pleasing, sharp triangles and long stripes colourful enough the thin strands of copper woven into the quilt were hard to make out. Enchanted, I thought. Those were definitely enchanted. The riders themselves were no less splendid. Their segmented steel lamellar bore a single pauldron on the right shoulder lined with lion's fur, while from the left hung a long sash whose patterns matched those of horse's armour – if you did not pay attention, your eye might be tricked in thinking them a single creature.

They each bore a spear, a shield, and curved sword and three javelins. All glittered with rubies and ivory. *Light cavalry*, I thought. They'd break under a charge of my knights, but my men would die of exhaustion before catching up and those javelins looked nasty. Javelins could punch through plate, if you knew how to throw them. Ornate helmets added the final touch, rounded tops bearing bright red feathers with an eye-catching mouthguard made of two ivory tusks atop a coloured veil of mail.

Splendid as they were, though, the soldiers were nothing to the three nobles that had come. To the sides of Sargon Sahelian were mage nobility, amber-eyed and smiling. Over silk coats they wore breastplates entirely decorative – they went only halfway to the belly – but beautifully crafted, inlaid with gold filigree and rib-like white enamel stripes. They wore gorgeous red cloaks bordered in gold, and at their sides were jewel-encrusted swords too pristine to have ever seen use. Each wore a king's ransom of artefacts as earrings and bracelets, necklaces and trinkets. Beautiful and poisonous, they laughed as they pressed forward their horses.

The High Lord of Wolof made them both look like beggars. For half a heartbeat I thought he had dressed severely, a simple painted scale armour over a red coat, but then the 'scale' caught the light. It wasn't painted, I realized. It was made of precious stones, every last scale: garnets and tourmaline and rubies, sapphires of every tone and colour, onyx and chalcedonies and

amethysts. I found the sheer waste fascinating, in a repulsive sort of way. The hem and sleeves of his coat were embroidered with black and white maze-like patterns that were dizzying to look at – enchanted, probably – while High Lord Sargon's shoulder-length black hair was flecked with pale feathers longer than any bird I knew could grow.

Golden eyed like his cousin, the High Lord of Wolof rode in the shadow of the lemon trees and his retinue followed. The dappled light danced lightly across the colours, making it seem as if they shivered like waves on a pond, and my breath caught in my throat at the sight of them all. Beautiful and terrible, as Akua had once proclaimed at the Doom. There really was no one in the world like the Soninke, was there? Sometimes, about some things, their arrogance was not unwarranted. One of the two nobles peeled ahead of the rest, reining in his mount thirty feet or so away from us. I felt the weight of his gaze sweeping across us for a moment before he offered a short bow.

"You stand before High Lord Sargon Sahelian of Wolof, he who rules over the temples antediluvian and the vaults of forbidden knowledge," the man announced in Mthethwa, his voice pleasantly rich. "You may kneel in awe."

How nice of him to give us permission. We were a stiff-kneed bunch, Callowans, so no one took him up on the kind offer. To my surprise, Akua took a step forward. The noble's eyes moved to her, gone wary the way you would when encountering a venomous snake.

"You stand before Queen Catherine Foundling of Callow, the Black Queen," Akua announced, tone light and amused, "she who has broken gods and bargained with them, stolen the sun and contended Choirs three. Your boasts are *shallow*, Naiser Mutinda."

The man sneered down at her.

"The once-proud daughter of Wolof returns a lackey," he said. "Disappointing."

I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff.

"You're wasting my time," I mildly said, staring at the man.

He hesitated but Naiser, since that seemed to be his name, wasn't quite brave enough to mouth off to me to my face.

"High Lord Sargon blesses these talks with standing of truce," the nobleman said.

The actual reason he'd come, this. Making sure we couldn't take swings at each other without consequences.

"So do I," I said. "Now let him talk for himself, lackey, before I begin to lose patience."

"There was no need for that sort of talk, Naiser," an urbane voice chided. "My cousin's return is something to celebrate, not take offence to."

Sargon Sahelian had dismounted while we entertained his man, the noblewoman to his side having followed suit, and as Naiser deferred to his liege lord I took a moment to study him more closely. The precious scale armour somehow didn't look ridiculous when worn on foot, which surprised me, but not as much as the realization that the High Lord of Wolof wasn't actually good looking. His chin was a little weak, the arch his eyebrows uneven and his nose too large for his face. He was far from *ugly*, but I'd gotten used to unearthly beauty being the norm among Wasteland aristocrats. The pageantry called attention away from it, though, and for a moment I thought of Cordelia Hasenbach.

"Do I pass muster then, Black Queen?" the High Lord of Wolof amusedly asked me.

Huh. It'd been a while since someone had called me out on studying them.

"I'm just amazed your armour doesn't actually seem to be uncomfortable," I replied, half-serious.

He laughed, revealing white but slightly crooked teeth.

"My great-grand uncle was vain but not foolish," High Lord Sargon said. "He knew he'd have to wear the artefact after ordering it crafted."

"He also ate tiger hearts for supper every other day," Akua noted. "Let us not hasten to the conclusion of wisdom."

While I was morbidly curious as to why anyone would eat a tiger heart, much less a regular supply of them – I bet it was a virility thing, always was with wealthy older men – Sahelian family anecdotes weren't why I'd come out here. I lightly slapped my staff against the side of the tree I stood under, claiming their attention.

"You wanted talks, High Lord," I said. "You have them. I recommend against wasting that chance."

The dark-skinned aristocrat nodded, seemingly unconcerned.

"I could dance with words over Wolof not having warred on Callow under my rule, but I imagine that would go against the spirit of your recommendation," Sargon said.

"Malicia's my enemy," I said. "You're one of hers."

If Wolof followed the Dread Empress of Praes, I would treat it accordingly.

"That is unfortunate," Sargon said. "Though I would convey that she does not wish to be at war with you anymore than I do. She seeks to offer peace terms, Queen Catherine."

"It's more than a few corpses too late for that," I sharply replied.

"Are you truly so petty you would not even listen to the terms, Catherine?"

My fingers clenched. Among the riders, one of them had taken off her helmet. It wasn't Malicia's real body but the cadence of the words, the presence? The body she was possessing with that ritual of hers smiled at my anger, but I didn't let it burn hot. It went cold instead, frozen, and I raised my hand to snap my fingers. Malicia's mouth opened, but before she could speak so much as a word there were a few flickers of light. An arrow streaked through layers of enchantments and tore right through her throat. She fell over, gurgling, and already halfway into the grave. Archer did not miss, not at this range. Even as the retinue began to raise their spears and my knights lowered their lances, I met Sargon Sahelian's eyes.

His calm had not broken and neither had mine.

"I trust you have a good reason I shouldn't just burn you all alive for bringing her to these talks," I conversationally said.

He didn't even flinch, which reluctantly raised my esteem of him a notch.

"I have on my person three artefacts known as the Weeping Snares," Sargon replied. "They contain demons, and I have had an artificer bind all three seals to a command artefact in my possession."

"I have the Hierophant," I said. "Any leash you have on them will be mine before the first incantation's finished."

"There are no leashes on them, Catherine," Akua quietly said. "It is why my ancestors left them in the vault instead of using them for war. They are simple containers, forged in cruder times."

I hummed and thought for a moment, Sargon never blinking as he watched me. I could see sweat beading on the back of his neck. Not worth the risks, I eventually decided. Even should I weight that it was worth the damage to my reputation to break truce and kill the High Lord of Wolof, there was no guarantee that his successor would be more pliable – or that they'd negotiate with me at all.

"Clever," I finally said. "Talk, then. We both know you came to make an offer."

"You have seized Sinka and Jinon," the High Lord said, "and this tightens the noose around my city. Yet we are each aware that Wolof could withstand a siege for longer than you can afford. I do not believe that you want to storm my walls anymore than I want them stormed, Black Queen."

He shrugged, offering a disarming crooked smile.

"Would you be terribly offended if I offered you a bribe to go away?" he baldly asked.

*It's the teeth that give you away, Sargon, I thought. They were just one step too far. Even in Callow there were hedge mages in some cities that could straighten your teeth. There was no way that the High Lord of Wolof couldn't get his own fixed, which meant keeping them was a choice. How many of your countrymen fell for that little smile, Sargon? Its just honest enough to trust, to believe coming out of a lesser branch's son. How many saw it coming before you slid the knife? Aisha had warned me once, about charming Sahelians and the dooms they wrought.*

"We can call them war reparations, somewhat overdue," I mused. "I'm interested."

"That is... pleasing to hear," Sargon admitted.

He looked faintly relieved, though I wondered how much of it was feigned.

"I'll want your granaries," I idly told him, "your treasury and a pledge that Wolof will withdraw from the civil war."

With each addition his smile grew more strained.

"Some of this can be haggled," Sargon tried. "The last cannot. If the Webweaver is truly one of your followers now, I imagine you know why."

Malicia had soulboxed him and was unlikely to be pleased if he abandoned her cause. Terrible torture would ensue, presumably. It was an opening I'd been waiting for, though, and half the reason I'd made the demand in the first place.

"Hierophant can cut the city off from scrying," I said. "She wouldn't know until much too late."

I saw him hesitate a fraction, then push through.

"Wolof has secrets beyond the ken of Wekesa the Warlock's knowledge, or that of his son," Sargon said. "Your premise is untrue."



I hid a smile. I'd given something by revealing Masego could put them in a box if I wished him to, but without knowing it he'd given me something too: he was afraid of Malicia *personally*, not as an abstract. Not through scrying, assuming I even believed his vague talk of secret Wolofite magics that Hierophant couldn't dismantle. *She still has another body in Wolof*, I thought. My fingers clenched with something that was neither quite fear or triumph. It was too strong an investment for me to be the sole reason for it. I had put out my bait in the right place.

"It seems we're at an impasse, then," I shrugged.

"I can still offer great... reparations of gold and foodstuffs, Queen Catherine," High Lord Sargon said. "Can a bargain not be had?"

"Of course – I'm a reasonable woman, High Lord Sargon," I lied. "I just want your entire treasury and all your food."

I paused.

"And also the armour you're wearing," I whimsically added. "As a polite reminder that if you ever try to bring a Named capable of mind control to truce talks again, I will brutally murder you as an object lesson."

I was going to have to get everyone checked for hooks in their minds, which would be a pain. That'd cost him.

"Well," High Lord Sargon muttered, "at least it is a *succinct* sort of extortion."

"And to think they tell me I can't do diplomacy," I brightly smiled.

"I can't imagine why," Sargon amiably replied, not batting an eye. "I will have to discuss your terms with my advisors, Queen Catherine. Perhaps negotiations can resume at a later date."

I shrugged.

"If you want," I said. "Until then, I'm under oath to offer you an exchange for the prisoners taken in Jinon. As you have none of mine imprisoned to trade, I've set ransoms instead. Akua?"

She offered the scroll, which without hesitation the High Lord of Wolof took. He unfolded it, eyes scanning the lines. I'd set truly extortionate rates, ten year's pay for every soldier and officer as well as massive lump sums for every highborn. Even for someone as wealthy as the High Lord of Wolof, it'd be a costly racket. My bet was on him bringing home only the highborn, part of the reason I'd jacked up their ransoms on principle. The rest

was that I had a godsdamned war to pay for, and it wasn't going to pay for itself.

"Yes," Sargon Sahelian briskly said. "I'll send the sum to your camp by cart before nightfall. I trust you will return them to the city at the earliest convenience."

I hid my surprise, but not quite quickly enough he didn't notice it.

"We're a greedy breed, Sahelians," the High Lord crookedly smiled. "The coin I'll make again in time, Black Queen. People are not so easily replaced."

Huh. That was the closest to respect I'd felt for him all day, even knowing he might be playing me. The talks ended without further ceremony, and it was in a pensive mood that I rode back to camp. I felt like I'd missed something, though I couldn't put my finger on what.

So far, we hadn't missed a beat.

—

I woke up in the middle of the night to the screams and smoke.

## Chapter 5: Incursion

*"The Heavens pick the victor, my friends, but the Hells detail the aftermath. How else can it be explained that when a battle is won we most commend the general – that is, the only man in the army that can be relied on not to have picked up a weapon?"*

— Captain Thierry the Acerbic, addressing his company before the Battle of the Twelve Routs

It was tempting to just run out sword in hand to find out what was happening, but I resisted the urge. I'd learned the hard way that recklessness could have permanent costs – like half someone's total supply of eyes, for example. I put up my hair in a loose ponytail and strapped on my armour, not without fumbling, and only after putting on a helmet did I finally limp out. Sword at my hip and deadwood staff in hand, I looked out into the night and found entire swaths to the south of my camp aflame. Had Sargon played me with the ransom payment? It shouldn't be. Hierophant had inspected the ingots personally and they were in a warded pit anyway. It made no sense either, considering I hadn't even given him back his prisoners yet. I'd kept them overnight as a precaution against foul play and he had to know I might hang them as an object lesson if he tried something.

Sargon Sahelian hadn't struck me as the kind of man who pissed away either gold or lives.

I made my way to the tent closest to mine, where Adjutant had placed a station of his adjunct secretariat, but there were no phalanges there. I found a line of regulars hurrying south through the dirt avenue passing by my tent, however, and wasted no time approaching the lieutenant in charge. A young Taghreb, no older than twenty and rosy-cheeked.

"Your Majesty," he breathed out, before snapping into a more professional salute.

"Lieutenant," I said. "What's happening? I'm not hearing the alarm wards."

"Our wards are down, ma'am," he replied. "All of them. And we're under attack by giants."

Our wards were *down*? I felt a shiver of unease. Not even the Dead King had managed that so easily. The mention of giants, though, had me skeptical. I seriously doubted the Gigantes had anything to do with this. Ogres, though, I'd be willing to believe. I had less than a tenth of ogres left in the entire Army of Callow – our campaigns had not been kind, and none lost were ever replaced – but the Dread Empire would not be so limited. That would mean a Legion raid, which did nothing to settle my discomfort. I'd learned enough at the feet of the Legions of Terror to know how brutally skilled they were at what they did.

"What did they hit?" I asked.

"I don't know, Your Majesty," the lieutenant admitted. "My orders are just to head at the southern rally point with my line and await further orders."

I smothered my irritation. It wasn't his fault I wasn't aware of what was going on and taking it out on the kid would help no one.

"Let's go then, lieutenant," I evenly said. "There's no time to waste."

I pulled at Night – and how crisply it came now that dusk had passed, almost as easily as before the Ruination – and killed the pain in my bad leg so I would be able to keep up with the brisk pace of the legionaries. We passed through a sparsely manned checkpoint, but there was no way the sergeant in charge would know more than the lieutenant I was with so I pushed on. At the second checkpoint, I found Adjutant waiting for me. He was armed and armoured, with an axe in his dead hand and a broad shield in his steel one.

"Catherine," he gravelled. "Apologies, by the time my phalanges reached your tent you'd already left."

I waved it away and didn't bother to ask how he'd known where I would go. There were lines between us where there once had been none, but he was still my Adjutant.

"What's happening?" I bluntly asked.

"The Legions of Terror are hitting us," Hakram gravelled. "Less than a hundred, nearly all ogres. They gated out of Twilight a foot away from the outer palisade and smashed through, then used some sort of artefact that fried our wards. Hierophant and Akua are working on getting them up again."

"Fuck," I eloquently said. "Do we know what they're after?"

"They split into two forces," Adjutant said. "The one lighting the fires is going straight for our supplies and Juniper's mustering men to drive them out. The other force – smaller, we think – is headed west."

My eyes narrowed. West had Sargon's soldiers and the rest of the warded pits we'd dug. Was this a rescue operation? That made little sense. The High Lord of Wolof had already paid their ransom and they'd be handed over come morning. Something didn't fit, and that made the second force the odd hand. The one to watch out for.

"That's the one we'll intercept," I decided. "Where's Archer?"

"She's-"

"Disappointed you didn't hear her coming, is what she is," Indrani drawled.

My hand was halfway to my sword when I recognize her voice, and my muscles stayed tense until she'd moved out from the tent she'd used as cover for her approach. There was some alarm as legionaries began to notice her, but it didn't last long. She was a known quantity for my soldiers.

"That's what we have you for," I retorted. "Vivienne, Huntress, the kids?"

"Vivienne is with Juniper," Hakram said.

"Alexis went to guard Cocky," Indrani said. "I'm not sure for the kids."

For a moment I almost sent Adjutant to look for them – he had the right aspect to Find the needle in the haystack – but I held back. He might see it as him being sent away from the fight, one

which would be hard enough *without* shedding off a third of our Named before we started.

"Send one of yours to Vivienne," I ordered Hakram. "I want them kept from getting into too much trouble."

Entirely out of trouble was sadly more than could be reasonably asked for, given that they were Named. Hakram nodded and saw to it, even as I checked my gear one last time. I made a note to have a bag of goblin munitions prepared for me and kept in my tent. Now that Scribe's scheme had paid off and we'd essentially bought out High Lady Wither's stocks of munitions – with the blessing of the Matrons, who saw it as weakening her military strength even if our grain helped her maintain control in the short term – I could afford to start using them again. The moment Adjutant was back we headed out together, moving fast. Since our wards were down and we had an idea of where our enemies were headed, we took a shortcut through the Ways to try to intercept. We sidled through instead of using a gate, since Indrani found us a path in moments, and it allowed us to skip over all the barricades, checkpoints and mustering soldiers.

The advantage of fighting people as tall as ogres was that, given the average height of tents in our camp, we could easily see them from a distance. Within moments of leaving Twilight I had my eyes on maybe twenty towering silhouettes, all decked in pitch-black plate engraved with runes and wielding massive flanged maces. Those were *not* Legion heavies, not any kind I'd ever seen.

"Archer, go around," I said, already pulling at the Night. "Begin on my signal."

"Gotcha," she said, pulling down her hood.

She slipped into the shadows, swift-footed even as she began to string her bow.

"Adjutant," I said, shaping the Night, "I want you to bait them. Take the front and draw them in."

"Warlord," Hakram replied, flashing his fangs happily.

I finished the last touch on the 'eye' of Night I'd made and threw it up in the air. A shadow on black, it remained unseen to our foes even as I closed my physical eye and made myself see through that one. It didn't tell me much more about the enemy force itself, but it *did* give me a bird's eye view of them moving around the camp. *They're not headed towards the prisoners*, I realized. They'd walked right past an avenue that led to their pit, and I doubted it was because of the two lines of regulars manning the palisade around the prison pit. They were after something else and moving like they knew they layout. Which they would, of course, since the Army of Callow pretty much used the

Legion layout with a few modifications. It sunk in a moment later.

The ransom. It was further east in a guarded pit as well, and the group – twenty-one ogres and two humans, I counted – would soon get to an avenue that'd lead them straight there. But why the Hells would Malicia care about the gold? The empress still collected taxes from most of Praes, she was positively rolling around in coin she couldn't spend for lack of friendly neighbours. I set the question aside for now, as I had more urgent cats to skin. I checked Adjutant was on the right path to reach the enemy, which he was, and then prepared to disperse the eye. There was no point in even trying to find Archer, I knew that from experience.

Then the night lit up with a flash of sorcery as streaks of flame hit one of the lead ogres, scarring the black plate, and I caught sight of two small humans getting in the way of the enemy.

*"Fuck,"* I cursed.

The kids were there and getting in over their heads. These weren't Bones or a handful of necromantic monsters, they were a well-armed Legion strike team. I broke into a run without hesitation, knowing that if I lingered for too long they might be dead by the time I arrived. So much for springing an ambush. Calling on Night, I formed a rough wedge of power in front of me and ran straight through the tents in my way. It was a quick approach but not a subtle one, as was made clear when one of the ogres grabbed a javelin the size of a small tree and threw it my way.

I twisted the Night into a different working, catching the weapon in flight and turning it around before tossing it back. A miss, I saw, but hopefully it'd discourage a repeat. I formed another wedge and immediately another ogre threw a javelin at me. I cursed, resorting to the same trick and this time scoring a glancing blow against an ogre's breastplate. They weren't trying to kill me, I grasped, they were slowing me down. The bastards weren't even intending to fight us, were they? They'd just do what they'd come for and then retreat.

Gods but I hated fighting against well-trained soldiers.

Thankfully, I could fall back onto the sage lessons of my childhood: if the other guy had a better plan, you just had to sock them in the face real hard until they forgot it. I abandoned the idea of the relatively harmless wedge and instead of drew deep on the Night, waves of heat emanating from me as I formed a massive ball of blackflame and tossed it in a straight line in front of me. It burned through tents and barricades, clearing me a straight path and smashing into one of the ogres. Even as I ran, my brow knotted when the flames cleared and I saw my working

hadn't actually broken the ogre's plate. It'd blackened it further, half-melted it, but the fire had only gone through the armour's visor. It was still enough to have the soldier screaming and clawing at his face.

Archer put an arrow between the hands and straight into the skull a moment later, dropping the ogre.

I unsheathed my sword as I crossed the last of the distance separating me from the melee, the flash of flames flickering at the edge of my sight and bathing the silhouette of the closest ogre in light. The great flanged mace rose, and Night or not there would be no *parrying* that. I struck out with my staff, black flames boiling out of the top as I aimed for the visor again, but I was forced to abandon the working when another ogre used drove a javelin like a spear into my flank. I hastily backpedalled out of range, almost eating the mace blow from the first as I did. Redirecting the black flame into striking the side of the mace's head got me out of it, but the ground shook as the flanged head tore into the earth besides me. Worse yet, more and more of the ogres were converging on me.

A few I could handle, but ten? That was going to get tricky.

Then Adjutant came out swinging from their left flank a heartbeat later, proving once more that splendid timing was written into his very Role. The surprise earned me a moment to shape Night in between ducking away from a wild mace swing, and I threw up another eye so that I could see through it and grasp the lay of the entire melee. It was only the beginning. Power coursed richly through my veins even as I saw one of the ogres draw back his arm to throw a javelin, but I grit my teeth and kept weaving my miracle. My eye in the sky stayed focused on my enemy's arm, spellbound. *Almost there*, I thought, watching as the plate-covered arm flexed and the tree-sized javelin went flying. I breathed in and out, listening to the instincts trained into my body by years of war.

A half-step to the side, the movement precise enough I felt the steel head of the javelin brush against my side, but I'd done it. I was finished.

"Bang," I grinned, staff coming down against the floor in a strike.

I kept the eye for just a second, long enough to place the ten orbs I was capable of handling at one time. Night formed out of thin air in front of ten visored faces, looking like spinning orbs for half a heartbeat before they burst and air was sucked in. I'd first used the air explosion trick against demons at the Arsenal, but I'd improved it in the months since. This time, at the heart of the 'orb' there was a seed of blackflame. The air getting sucked in pulled in the ten ogres, just in time for the

blackflame to grow unstable and explode in their faces along with the sharp burst of air. The result was a brutal blow of physical strength and fire that dented the visors before delivering the blackflame through the opening. Most of the ten died instantly and those that didn't began to scream in pain.

From the corner I saw Adjutant take a blow on his shield, aspect pulsing as he withstood the strength as if it were a breeze. He struck with perfect timing as the ogre withdrew, toppling his foe down into an already-trampled tent. He had that under control, I decided. I could push through to the kids.

I ran past a slowly falling ogre, clutching at her broken and burning face, and as she struck the ground behind me like a small earthquake I found myself frowning. There had been two humans earlier, mages presumably, but I couldn't see them in the melee at the moment. Where – the only warning I got was the feeling of the air being moved, and I wasn't quite quick enough. My staff was struck as I got pushed away, the silhouette of an ogre coming into sight for a flickering second as I was blown off my feet and my staff went clattering in the distance. *Fuck*, I thought, rolling away as I felt the air move again and the ground was hammered in front of me. One of the mages was using illusionary enchantments. I rose back to my feet lurching about, grasping a handful of Night and throwing it blindly ahead.

It stuck, as I'd hoped, and a blotch of darkness appeared on what looked like the side of the mace trying to smash me to bits. It'd do. Slicing behind me with my blade, I opened a gate into the Ways and stepped through. I glimpsed greenery and felt gentle wind before crossing back into a warm Wasteland night, coming out on the side of the mace I'd tagged and spinning out chords of Night. I hooked them around the mace, forcing it and the ogre back into flickering visibility, and then wrapped the chords around the shoulders and helmet of the ogre. Hands tight on the bonds I twisted, Night obeying my will as the ogre struggled to keep the mace away from their helmeted head and I tightened the noose. I was cheating, of course. It wasn't strength I was using to tighten the chords but willpower, weaving Night, and the limits on my will were lesser than those on the soldiers' body.

With a third twist of the wrist I tightened the chords into a vise and the side of the mace went through the helmet with a loud crunch. I wasn't sure how far it'd gone into the skull beneath it, but the ogre was out of the fight regardless. That freed me to go forward, where I saw Arthur Foundling being battered down with brutal efficiency by an ogre. His shield was already a crumpled ruin and one of his shoulders obviously broken. The Apprentice was shooting darts of fire and spears of lightning at the ogre, but all it did was slow them some. Not even a mark was left on the armour, which had me staring. Even enchanted plate would have marks after that, and my heartbeat quickened when I



saw the ogre kick Squire in the stomach when Arthur tried to slide behind them.

He'd been moving with Name quickness, unnaturally swift, but his opponent had begun moving the exact moment he did. No one was that fast without a Name, I knew, without leaning on that set of reflexes that came with a martial Role. From the corner of my eye I saw an arrow hit a man in the throat, the spell he'd been halfway through – aimed at Adjutant's back – dying with him, but I looked past the corpse and found that four ogres were covering the last mage's hasty retreat. I moved to the side, climbing over an ogre corpse to get a better vantage, and cursed. The pit where we'd left the ransom gold was now empty. They'd brought a caster that could use High Arcana and shoved all the ingots into a pocket dimension, the tricky fuckers.

As if I'd allow that. I drew on Night.

I heard Arthur Foundling scream as he was smashed into a barricade by a blow, and for a heartbeat I weighed the choice. The gold might keep a lot of my people alive, keep them fed and armed for the war on Keter, and the Squire was still a potential threat to Vivienne in the coming years. If I pursued the last mage instead now... The thought was ugly, but ugly wasn't enough to stay my hand anymore. I needed better than that – *Name*, I thought, mind racing. He was in a fight of Named, one he'd stumbled into through heroic providence. That could be a potent tool, used right. Eye tearing away from the fleeing mage, I broke into a run. Ribbons of lightning struck at the back of the tall ogre with impotent fury, making the enchanted steel glow but little more as I shaped Night into thick tendrils.

The looming ogre raised their mace as the Squire rolled to the side, grasping for his sword. He'd be too slow. The flanged mace came down and the boy's face paled but his fingers closed around the handle of his blade anyway. He'd die trying. Or not die at all, preferably. I struck out, tendrils of shadows layered over my arm like some sort of skeletal armature, and the strength of it was just enough to slap aside the mace before it could crush the boy's skull. I stood between the two of them, Night wafting off me like smoke as I prepared another trick, and cocked an eyebrow.

"So Malicia's picked up a Named," I said. "Which one are you, I wonder?"

Our foe – a woman, I glimpsed through the visor – did not answer. She raised her mace again, drawing back to make space for a swing, but I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"Not Warlock," I mused, "or you would have seen *that* coming."

The Night-smoke I'd had trailing along the ground solidified around her feet as shackles, so when she finished the movement of striking the imbalance tripped her. I stepped to the side as she began to topple forward, tapping the side of my sword against Arthur's flank tell him he should follow suit. An arrow whistled, aimed straight at the gap in the plate between the neck and the helmet, but with unnatural deftness the massive mace swept up to bat the killing blow away just before the ogress hit the ground face first.

"Martial, and not a transitional Name if you have control that fine," I noted.

I raised my sword, calling Night to it even as the ogre grunted with effort and burst through my shackles with brute strength. And yet I was not worried in the slightest. I knew, somehow I just *knew*, that the timing would work out perfectly. I could see it as if it were written in the air, as if it were inevitable. As if some grinning devils down Below had put their coin on me and their fingers on the scale to match.

I was following my Role, and so the tide of Creation was on my side.

"None of that," I chided my foe, bringing my blade down on her back as she tried to raise.

The Night struck out from the point of my sword like a needle, shattering the backplate, and then like cracks of ice my power went skittering in every direction and shattered the enchanted steel. The ogre was smashed back down into the ground. I heard bones break and froze in surprise. I'd not hit her that hard, not for a Named, and that was the moment it fell into place. My limbs grown strong with the touch of my growing Name, I moved forward and flipped over the gasping ogre. She did not resist, broken. I stripped off her helmet and a single look at those dark eyes was enough to confirm my suspicion: the power in there was fading. Not because I'd killed its wielder, but because I'd damaged the vessel too badly.

"Black Knight," I greeted. "So what's the aspect you're using, I wonder – something like Deputize, Mandate?"

I wrinkled my nose.

"No, you're clearly Legion," I said. "You're using mostly ogres, too, so I'd guess you're Marshal Nim. 'Commission', maybe?"

It clearly wasn't her full strength she'd put in the body, else the kids would be dead twice over. The ogress hacked out a cough, dying, and I sighed. Wouldn't get anything out of her. I sheathed my sword, but halfway through the gesture the almost-corpse suddenly lunged. A single massive hand reached over my shoulder,

grasping the Squire's throat behind me, and she began to *squeeze* – I felt horror swell, I wouldn't be quick enough with the Night I was reaching for – she went still. It was not luck that did it, but the eerily silent arrow Archer had loosed that went through her eye. I roughly dragged Arthur away by the scruff of his neck as the body dropped, the boy moaning in pain. As well he should, he was basically a mass of bruises and bloody wounds. He sagged against the ground.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," he got out. "I owe you-"

"Nothing," I cut in, tone sharper than I meant it to be.

I refused to feel guilty. I was long past the luxury of clean choices, and just because today I'd chosen to keep him alive didn't mean that tomorrow would see me make the same decision. The boy looked like I'd slapped him and I sighed again.

"Consider this a wake-up call," I said. "This is what fighting with real Named and not Revenant puppets feels like. The Black Knight on the other side used a single aspect, not even in her real body, and she still nearly pulped you."

"You're not going to tell me it was foolish to fight?" the boy asked.

"It wasn't a foolish fight, you just fought foolishly," I corrected. "You likely saved a lot of soldiers' lives by stepping in, the part that needs work is the one where you almost died doing it. You won't be helping anyone when you're in a grave, maybe keep that in mind."

"Nothing we did got through her defences," Arthur admitted. "Even at our best we were simply holding on."

And in that sentence, in the anger – the unspoken urge to do better next time, the certainty that there would be a next time – I saw an opportunity. A tool. And I was enough of a monster to make use of it, even when I was using a boy barely more than a child.

"So prepare yourself," I challenged. "Train. Make tactics."

He was silent for a moment, exhausted and in pain, but eventually his blue eyes went steely. He nodded, brushing back a black lock stained with sweat and blood.

"I won't lose, next time," Arthur Foundling swore.

And with those words I'd invited, with the weight of them spoken by his lips, I knew I had made myself a sword. Because unless I was wrong, a Squire and a Black Knight had just fought. And the Squire had begun that fledgling, fragile pattern with a defeat.

If I stoked those embers just right, that story would end with my enemy's blood on the floor.

—

In the wee hours of the morning, I sat with Vivienne and Juniper to go over the butcher's bill. The good news was that, as far as dead bodies went, our losses were light.

"Ninety-three dead," the Hellhound said. "Most of them regulars. We can thin some cohorts to make up for it, we still have the numbers to absorb that."

"And we inflicted eighty-two casualties ourselves," Vivienne noted. "Considering it was a surprise attack fielding almost entirely ogres, we made off decently in that regard."

I grunted in agreement. The attacked had escaped, but not without taking losses equivalent to about eight out of ten.

"We'll see if Masego can crack the enchantments on the armours," I said. "It's unlikely there will be enough of those to equip more than a handful of elite units, but that would be troublesome enough on its own."

I got grimaces of agreement. Ogres were bloody difficult to kill, unless you had either magic or munitions to deploy against them. It was a clever decision for Marshal Nim to focus on stripping the sorcery option from us, considering the Army of Callow had been in chronic munition deficit for essentially its entire existence.

"Losses in supplies were not as grave as they could have been," Juniper continued. "We changed the layout of the supply depots compared to standard Legion camp templates—"

She had, actually, making a point of it before we began marching, but my marshal wasn't the boasting type.

"—so our current tallies have the losses mostly in dried meat and grain, about a third of our total stock," she continued. "If our numbers stay roughly the same, Catherine, we're now down to roughly four months of food."

From six to four, huh. Four months for an army that could use the Ways was a very different beast than for an army that couldn't, but this had still been uncomfortably costly. A lot of food had gone up in flame tonight.

"If you had to guess," I said, "were they able to figure out what our total amount of supplies would be?"

She flicked her fangs uneasily.

"It's likely," Juniper admitted. "They might be slightly off, but the quantities were roughly even between depots and there are only so many places in a camp to put those."

Which meant that by morning High Lord Sargon would know that we couldn't afford to siege Wolof if we were going to do anything else this campaign season. There just wasn't enough food in our possession to spend months besieging him and then war elsewhere. In other words, our negotiating position with him had just been dealt a severe blow.

"We'll hit Wolof tomorrow, then," I said. "There's no more time to waste. The moment the Concocter is done with the powder I'll set out."

"It'd be for the best," Juniper agreed.

"Sargon's unlikely to ask for talks when he has the advantage, so in a way this lends us an additional dose of discretion," Vivienne noted. "Yet that brings me to the last of our outstanding issues: the prisoners for Wolof."

"They've been ransomed," I said, though my tone was neutral.

It wasn't a commitment so much as a statement. The High Lord of Wolof had paid the gold I'd asked for, and promptly too.

"We don't have that ransom anymore," Juniper said, "and it was taken by his empress. That's on him too."

It was, I wouldn't disagree with that.

"You want to keep them?" I asked.

"That or hang them," Juniper bluntly said. "We've been taken for a ride, Catherine. Maybe a point needs to be made."

"I don't think Sargon actually has anything to do with this," I admitted. "This has all the telltale marks of a Legion operation and he would have no pull there. This seems like an attack by Marshal Nim on our supplies that got a secondary objective tacked on."

"Malicia *would* gain from our going back on our word here," Vivienne said. "It would make Praesi lords warier of striking bargains with us."

My eyes narrowed as I followed the threads.

"She wins if we give them over too," I spoke through gritted teeth. "Rubies to piglets that ransom gold is going straight back to Sargon's coffers, and very publicly. She'd be proving she can score victories against us *and* that she's still protecting her vassals."

Hells, the way it neatly landed her a win no matter what we did had me more convinced this was a Malicia ploy than anything else I'd heard tonight. It was exactly the kind of plot she liked use. I passed a hand through my hair tiredly.

"We release them come dawn, as I promised," I finally said. "I'd rather let her flash her feathers than risk burning bridges we'll need to cross when treaties are made."

For all that I'd come here with an army, it wasn't conquest I was after. And if I started letting Malicia bait me into hanging prisoners, she'd keep doing that until Praesi considered me not worth negotiating with. *Or I'll have to let things go after taking a hard stance the first time and changing tacks will make me look witless.* Fucking Malicia. She really was a devil to deal with, when she had a good general to play off of. I could only imagine how much worse it would be if she still had Black under her. Angry as I was at how we'd been had, I mastered myself. Fine, she'd stuck a knife in us and it had stung. This was the kind of game she most excelled at and we were in her own backyard.

Tomorrow, we'd do things *my* way.

## Chapter 6: Retaliation

*"And so a great host came to stand before the Sererian Walls, led by four kings and three queens who meant to raise Aslam Isbili as king over Wolof. Their envoys were scorned by High Lady Akua of the Sahelians, and so in great anger did they storm her walls. Seven times and one was the army driven back, broken by sorcery until corpses stood tall as hills. Only then did High Lady Akua answer the envoys, speaking thus: 'Have you come to win a crown, or lose seven?'"*

– Extract from the Scroll of Ruin, twenty-fifth of the Secret Histories of Praes

There were eleven different secret passages into the city of Wolof and all of them were traps.

Akua had told me that one of her distant ancestors, after discovering several made by disloyal vassals aiming to overthrow the Sahelians, had decided instead of walling them up to make several more. High Lord Kofi had then seeded rumours about their existence, fake traitors and secret scrolls, and sat back waiting for all his enemies to come at him by where he'd see them coming. The number of passages had grown over the years as people outwitted Sahelians for a time, but in the wake of those victories the family always reclaimed the fresh weakness and added it to their centuries-old ploy. I'd been halfway to

admiring High Lord Kofi, until Akua noted he was also famous for his habit of throwing one of his cousins in a maze every summer solstice. Along with starved lions. It kept everyone on their toes, he'd claimed.

*Praesi.*

If there were no secret passages to use and storming the walls was too costly for us, then that left us few options to enter the city. Sneaking in as part of a delegation had been considered, but we'd be watched like hawks and likely kept under wards the whole time. Assuming we weren't just betrayed. Pickler had narrowed in on the aqueduct that fed the city as our way in, but her suggestion had been... overly bold. She'd wanted us to cut the water and send in goblins with munitions through the stone channel. They'd blow their way through the wards at the end and we'd funnel troops into that foothold by the dry aqueduct, taking enough of the city by surprise that Sargon was forced to either negotiate or suffer a sack. Problem was, I had my doubts that we *could* secure that foothold.

The aqueduct whose source was deep in the Jinon Hills was squatted over by the fortress of the same name, then whipped across the valley in straight line, but welcoming it into Wolof was yet another set of fortifications. The Sahelians weren't fools, they'd known the running water was the weakness in their wards. The place was fortified thoroughly and garrisoned through day and night: even if we *did* take the soldiers there by surprise, I figured it was a toss up whether we'd win the fight. And if we lost it, well, that'd get *bloody*. So a somewhat quieter way in was needed, which had led me to our current scheme. Namely, my old Everdark crew resurrected for one more jaunt: a more subtle infiltration of the city through the same weakness Pickler had identified.

I'd needed the Concocter to make it feasible, since without the ability to breathe in water that was a very long swim, but those vials and ransacking through the remains of the old Sudden Abjuration project had gotten me the right tools. Cordelia had been the one to most benefit from the emptying of the Arsenal, since she'd been able to take all the half-finished projects and throw them at the Dead King on various fronts, but taking the Concocter east had paid dividends for me. I knew the First Prince appreciated me not drawing too heavy on the pool of heavy hitters among Named, too. She'd not be so grateful if she knew I'd not shortchanged myself in the slightest, simply picking mine for stories instead of raw war potential. The Barrow Sword so that I could tie him up with the Blood, all of Ranger's surviving pupils for when it inevitably came to blows with her, two kids approaching the time of their transition into a more settled Named – hanging swords I could bring down, pulling at the right

strings. It was a pretty little arsenal, though it would not be of use here in Wolof.

No, here it was an older company that'd be taking the field again.

"I'd always imagined that if I crossed the Sererian Walls again it would either be as Empress or as bones," Akua said, eyeing the shape of the city in the distance.

"Well, you're slightly bones," Indrani mused. "You know, in a poetic sense."

"Ah, bones," the woman who had once been the heiress to Wolof drawled. "Those famously incorporeal body parts."

She made her shape turn shadowy for a moment to hammer the point home before returning to her usual guise.

"Poetry's all about metaphors, Heirloom Haunt," Indrani sneered. "It's a mark of your inferior education you don't know that."

Akua's face creased with what appeared to be genuine outrage.

"You were raised in the *woods*," she replied.

"I guess it must just be the gap between our natural talents, then," Indrani airily replied.

"There was a time where I would have had had you drowned for that sentence," Akua noted.

"Well," Indrani said, eyeing the aqueduct. "Day's young. Give it a shot."

Idly, I wondered if it was too late to replace one of them by Hakram. Sure, given how much metal he wore these days he'd swim about as well as a rock but I was having to weigh the prospect of dragging him along the bottom the whole time against at least a day of this.

Convenience *narrowly* won out.

"All right, let's get this going," I said. "The timing will get tricky if we linger."

I got a mocking salute from Archer and a graceful nod of acknowledgement from Akua, sparing one last look for the distant shape of Wolof before I left. The ramparts up here did have an amazing view during the day. We headed down into the belly of the beast, and I split from them to have a short conversation with the commander leading the garrison. He confirmed that Hierophant was already getting started on his ritual, which meant we needed



to get going. I ordered him to get the gears moving and followed my companions below, to the source feeding the aqueduct.

It was bare-bones, for such a crucial location, a cube of stone split in the middle by a rectangular 'river' that fed into the channel that would lead all the way to Wolof. The water actually came from further out, an underground spring deep in the hills, and this room had been raised for maintenance purposes. The stone conduct on raised steles – Pickler had commented unkindly on the way the Sahelians had been forced to fortify the stone with enchantments to compensate for not using arches the way the Miezens had – was dotted with warded "hatches" on the ceiling through which mages-engineers could enter to have a look at any blockage or foulness, but it wouldn't help the three of us: there wasn't enough space between the top of the channel and the water for anyone to be able to breathe reliably.

I would have been able to get around that with Night, probably by making a bubble around myself that let in air but not water, but the garrison would have seen us coming if we did. It would have tripped half a dozen wards on the aqueduct and destroying *those* would have tripped further defences. No, to go in quietly the solution was the water breathing potion. The three of us did a last check on our equipment before going into the water, professionalism finally shining through. Archer had been forced to abandon her usual bow, as it would be too large as well as enchanted, so she had a simple waxed shortbow with the backup strings stashed in a watertight bag along with her arrows. I'd shed the Mantle of Woe for this, settling for a simple grey cloak over my usual sword and armour.

Akua's clothes were sedate, and what she carried was not equipment meant for herself. The Concocter had finished the last of the ten bags of evanescent powder I'd requested half a bell ago, and they'd been brought straight here. The shade had them all, held in segmented bags held by complicated knots. One pull at the right place and they'd spread out while the bags opened, which was our way in. Sudden Abjuration had been the Arsenal project to create an alchemical substance capable of mimicking the effects of holy water. We'd never managed to make one that'd make it affordable to go through with the plan behind the project, turning all the lakes between us and the Dead King into holy water, but we'd had some successes nonetheless.

The evanescent powder, for one, would wash out active sorcery on contact. Like wards and enchantments trying to keep us out of Wolof.

"Everyone ready?" I asked.

"Bit of a swim without the potion, Cat," Archer grinned.

I rolled my eye, then glanced at Akua.

"At your disposal, my heart," she said.

"You should be more like her," I told Indrani.

She let a deeply insulted gasp, as I'd known she would, and I shoved a small glass vial into her hand. I'd thought about throwing it, but I was not going to roll the dice on this entire operation just to be flippant. It'd taken the Concocter long enough to make four doses – two to enter, two to leave – that I was not going to risk it all just before we left. I took out my own vial, glancing at the pale blue liquid inside. It looked almost milk-like, which was not appetizing in the slightest given the hue. I uncorked it and raised the vial in a toast that Indrani met, and it was bottoms up for the both of us. The entire thing tasted foul, like chalk cut with refuse, but I forced myself to swallow. I breathed in a few times, trying to get myself used to it.

On the surface it didn't feel like anything changed, but my lungs felt... heavier. Like something had grown.

"We only have an hour," I said. "Let's not waste it."

I went first, even though I wasn't the strongest swimmer – Indrani – as I saw best in the dark. And it was only moments before it was all pitch black, all the worst parts of swimming and crawling in a tunnel put together. A few strokes forward and already my lungs were burning, and I find myself fighting breathing in the water even though in principle I knew that I'd survive it. I ended up swallowing it all in a gulp, but the water didn't go any further than my mouth: a thin membrane had sprouted and it served as a filter, letting through air and not water. It was uncomfortable, unnatural even, but it worked so I grit my teeth and kept swimming forward. I could feel Akua right behind me, patiently waiting.

Shades didn't need to breathe, which at the moment I felt to be somewhat unfair.

Like most adventures, it didn't feel all that exciting as we did it. It was work, tiresome swimming through a tunnel-like channel of fresh water. I was wet and cold and my arms quickly grew tired. Now and then we encountered small lights as we passed under maintenance hatches in the stone, which were warded instead of sealed tight, but aside from that it was swimming forward in a gentle, almost unnoticeable slope. It was hard to tell how long it took us. We'd estimated half an hour at a brisk pace, maybe three quarters of an hour in practice, and my finely detailed sixth sense telling me how close I was to dawn and dusk helped measure how long we were taking.

We were slower than anticipated, so we had about a quarter hour left before the potion ran when we finally arrived at the

gatehouse. I gestured for the other two to stop, studying the steel grid in front of us. The builders of this gatehouse had been faced with a problem when raising it, namely that you couldn't actually raise wards over running water. There were wards on both sides of the channel I could see going into the gatehouse, a large stone room where I could glimpse torchlight through the water's surface. In the water itself, though, the Sahelians had been forced to instead use three enchanted metal grids to prevent infiltrators going through.

That was our opening, actually. As with all fortresses, its true weakness was not in the walls or the gates but in the petty demands of maintenance. In this case, should debris large enough to go through the bars of one grid got stuck on the bars of another grid there needed to actually be a way for someone to *get it out*. Preferably without, you know, this turning into a major undertaking involving knocking down walls or parts of the aqueduct. So the builders had put 'doors' in the grids, large enough for a small person to swim through if they held themselves horizontally. Those doors were held fast with very physical steel padlocks and more eldritch keyed enchantments, and they were our way into the city of Wolof.

Archer swam forward, elbowing me in our narrow confines, and had a close look at the pair of padlocks on the door. She offered me a nod, which was a relief. She believed she'd be physically strong to pry those open using her Name, then. Tempting as it would have been for her to try it, we couldn't afford to right now: the damn things were enchanted to glow if anyone touched them. Sahelian paranoia was truly inspiring. The two of us awkwardly made room for Akua to swim past us, which she did with unearthly elegance in the middle of this cramped hellhole, and golden eyes met mine to ask for the permission to begin. I nodded and the shade turned her back to the grids before pulling at the right rope, releasing all the knots holding closed the bags of evanescent powder.

It wasn't all that flashy a sight: the pale powders spread out in great clouds that faded quickly, and then the only sign they'd been used was that the water looked slightly thicker. The current guided it down, past all three grids and then beyond. Akua withdrew without a word, making room for Archer, and I clenched my fists as I watched her dart forward. After an agonizing moment she closed her fingers around the padlock and nothing happened at all. No glow, no alarm. I grinned. It'd worked. Indrani ripped open the padlocks methodically and swam through the door to get working on the second grid. Even after the unpleasantly long swim, I now felt full of energy: I took my sword off my belt, pulling it close so it wouldn't get in my way when I swam through.

Ahead, Indrani broke the last padlocks and I was gesturing for Akua to go ahead when I caught sight of shapes moving above the water. Hissing in dismay I flattened myself against the side of the channel, Akua doing the same behind me, but it was Archer in danger of being discovered. If she'd been in the dark she would have been fine, but moments later a long wooden staff was plunged into the waters and I saw that at its head was a stone enchanted to glow with light. Indrani had moved before she could be seen, hiding on the side of the wall in the dead angle, but the grid... I started with surprise. Oh, that canny wench. While I'd been panicking, she'd put the padlocks she'd broken on the last door back. They were still busted, but she'd hung them at an angle where it was hard to see.

There was the indistinct sound of people talking, at least three voices, and one seemed to be mocking another. The staff was suddenly withdrawn and I sagged in relief. If it'd come to a fight *here*, it might have gotten ugly. We waited as long as I dared, far after the voices had gotten distant. Our last quarter hour was thinning out dangerously and there was still more swimming ahead of us, so reluctantly I gave the signal again. Archer opened us the path through and we got moving, myself last and hanging the padlocks behind me as I closed the doors so that it would be hard to tell we'd passed. We had an even better cover for our tracks coming, but best not to get sloppy.

Hugging the bottom of the channel we went past the open channel in the torchlit room, into a squeezing tight tunnel that dropped downwards precipitously. Barely swimming at that point, I let myself be dragged forward and then swam up when we ended up where we'd meant to: the first of the three great reservoirs where the water from the aqueduct would be kept before going out into the city itself. The reservoir, little more than a large cistern, wasn't entirely full: I breached the surface to moist air, finding Akua and Archer already climbing up towards the hatch at the top.

"Fuck me," I muttered, "it actually-"

I bit my tongue at the last moment. I refused to tempt Fate like that.

"You'll be all right climbing?" Archer asked in a murmur.

I glanced at the handholds they were using, little more than indents into the side of the wall – people had to be able to come down to check for leaks or trash – and grimaced before I nodded. The herbs I'd taken for the pain in my leg were beginning to fade, but I'd make it up. It just wouldn't be pleasant, during or after. Indrani tried to push open the stone hatch but it didn't move. I cursed under my breath. Breaking that open wouldn't go unnoticed. Akua, however, had a solution. Her arm turning to mist, it slithered through a crack and I heard her work on the

hatch from the outside. Moments later it was hoisted open, Archer catching it and popping her head out to look.

She gave us a nod and a grin: the way was clear.

Indrani went out first, leaping down soundlessly, and Akua followed as I climbed up. My bad leg was burning, but only dimly. I closed the hatch behind us, twisting it into some sort of rough lock, and just like that we were in the city. Well, a fortress *within* Wolof anyway, but as far as I was concerned it counted. We were dripping all over the floor, save for Akua, who covered our tracks: she passed a mist-like hand over us and we found ourselves mostly dry. She pulled the same trick with the trails of wetness we'd left, and though we were still damp at least we wouldn't be leaving tracks.

"You remember the way out from here?" I softly asked.

"I've never been in this part of the fortress," Akua admitted, "but I have memorized the plans, same as you. It will be enough."

I nodded. It'd have to be. We were in a closed off section inside the fortress, but one that was relatively close to a way out. There ought to be a hall outside the reservoir room that'd go straight to a crossroads. Taking a left there would lead us straight to a bastion, and from there it was possible for us to leap down three levels into a large courtyard whose gate would lead us out in the city streets. The issue was that we hadn't known the guard schedules, so there was no telling if there were people in that bastion or not. And we couldn't afford to take our time here, because soon the Army of Callow was going to 'attack' the city.

"Take the lead, then," I ordered.

She nodded, her form rippling into that of a young Soninke soldier in Sahelian livery. Archer and I wouldn't be half as inconspicuous, unfortunately, so she'd be going ahead alone. The two of us hid behind the reservoirs, waiting for what seemed like an hour. She returned, footsteps silent and with a grave expression on her face.

"Only three in the bastion, but one is a mage," Akua said. "I would like Archer to kill him, I am at... risk otherwise. If he's a skilled enough caster, he could tap into the fortress wards."

"Indrani, you're up," I said.

"Ah, that ought to be bracing," she grinned. "See you in a bit, Your Graceful Regaliness."

"I hope you get caught," I sweetly replied, "so I can *consciously* choose to leave you behind."

She flipped me off, a sure sign of surrender if I'd ever seen one. The two of them disappeared into the hallway, eerily silent, and I was left to bite my thumbs. It'd been a while since I'd had to rely on others to do the dirty work, hadn't it? In Wolof, though, I would have to. In the city proper I'd be able to use Night again, in small doses, but in the heavily warded parts like the fortress it'd be like sending up a flare. I'd forgotten how boring actually doing things the right way tended to be, I thought with half a smile. I was considering how to dispose of the corpses – if we dragged them out of the wards, we could stash them in my shadow – when I heard the sound.

Someone was tuning a lute.

My hand dropped to the grip of my sword. The sounds of strings being plucked at methodically continued to echo in the room, and though I was tempted to remain hidden there was no point to it. The Intercessor already knew I was here, else why would *she* be? Pushing off the wall of the reservoir I'd been hiding behind, I loosened my cloak around my shoulders and took my hand off my sword. What would a blade do against the likes of the Wandering Bard? Putting a lazy smile on my face, forcing the tension out of my shoulders, I strolled out of hiding. She was not difficult to find. The Intercessor was seated on top of a reservoir, legs dangling as she finished tuning that shoddy lute. Fair-haired, this time, with deeply tanned skin and starry blue eyes. She was barely taller than I was, if at all, though she had curves I could only envy. And when I came out she raised a finger, putting that old silver flask to her lips and drinking deep. I waited, but the finger stayed up and she kept drinking. I cocked an eyebrow.

After an insulting amount of time, she pulled away the flask and smacked her lips before letting out a pleased sigh.

"Alavan pear brandy, Catherine," the Intercessor revealed. "Gotta drink while it's still the good stuff, you get me?"

"Never took to brandy," I idly replied. "Though I once knew a man more than passingly fond of that particular drink."

It'd been a barb, a test, and for it I got a pained grimace.

"I actually thought of him as a friend, you know," the Intercessor said. "Tariq was one in a thousand, even for Named. Even when every part of him was worn down to the bone, he never lost that *thing*. The spark. The part that makes a man take the lash so someone else doesn't have to. I don't think any of you ever appreciated how staggeringly rare that is."

"He probably would have kept kicking around a few years more, if you hadn't given our plans in Hainaut to the Dead King," I

harshly said. "How many graveyards' worth of friends have you buried, Intercessor?"

She pulled at a string, smiling at the broken side.

"More than you've had meals, Catherine Foundling," the Intercessor said, not denying or admitting a thing.

And the horror of it was that I believed her, believed her with bone-deep certainty. How many people you loved could you bury, before the only human thing about you was the guise you were? A hundred, a thousand, ten thousand? In that smiling woman's shadow was an empire's worth of graves.

"I'm a little disappointed the Arsenal only bought me a year without you," I said.

More or less, leaning on less.

"Praes is where the fun's at, these days," the Intercessor shrugged. "All those fires full of irons, all those old wounds never closed. It's in the air here, you know? The... *sincerity*. The Tower's the closest thing Below has to a smile. If you wanted me out of your hair, you should have kept away."

"Had a thing or two to get done hereabouts," I replied. "What – actually, have you got a name for me to use nowadays?"

She plucked at a string.

"Yara," the Intercessor smiled.

"Of?" I pressed.

"Oh," she shrugged, "nowhere in particular."

Well, wasn't that just fucking ominous.

"So what are you dropping in for, Yara?" I asked. "You got a horse in this race?"

For a moment her face was split between wonder and surprise. I hid my confusion, and like a firefly's flicker in the night her expression was wiped clean. Almost quick enough to make me wonder if I'd really seen anything at all.

"Eh, you could say that," the Intercessor said.

"Malicia or Sepulchral?" I asked, tone forcefully nonchalant.

It wouldn't be my father, if he became Dread Emperor he'd put an entire division of mages on figuring out how to permanently kill her. Captain's death was not something he would ever forgive.

"Oh," the Bard smiled. "That's cute. You think I give a shit about who's screaming their lungs out from the top of the Tower. I really, really don't."

"Come for the weather?" I drawled. "I suppose they do have a bit of everything, if you stand in the Wasteland long enough."

"You know, this is usually where I get cryptic," the Intercessor mused. "Give out a few hints – most of them lies, just enough truth I don't get bitten for it – and send you chasing ghosts while I line up the knife."

"But not this time?" I pressed.

"There's really no point," the Wandering Bard smiled, strumming the lute. "See, when you drop two starving hounds in a pit the time for *subtlety* is past. Now is the hour of tooth and claw."

"I killed you last year," I said. "Crows be my witness, next time I'll make it *stick*."

"That's the stuff," Yara of Nowhere laughed. "Come at me, Foundling. You want to know why I dragged my carcass to Praes?"

My answer was the whisper of my sword leaving its scabbard. Lute tuned at last, the Wandering Bard played the first few notes of an air I recognized, the beginning of 'Stars From the Sky'.

"The only reason I'm here is to kill you, Catherine Foundling," the Intercessor grinned. "We're done fucking around, now. There's no more room in this game for the likes of you."

And though I had never seen her wield a blade, never seen her do a single thing other than speak words and drink, in that moment I felt a shiver go up my spine. She had always been my foe, but this was... different. This was war, without pretence otherwise. Yet I would not be cowed, not today and not by the likes of her. I met her eyes, brown to blue.

"Take a swing," I smiled back, all teeth and malice. "*See where it gets you.*"

She laughed, loudly, and then swept into a drunken bow. She fell forward, off the reservoir, and as she did she screamed out at the top of her lungs. I struck out at her, blade aimed for the neck, but before she could touch the ground she was gone.

A heartbeat later, the alarm wards triggered with a loud screech.

## **Chapter 7: Expatriate**

*"A journey ends with two strangers: time changes the hearth no less than the traveller."*



– King Richard the Elder of Callow

What else could I do but run?

I shot out of the reservoir room, sword in hand, and into the hallway beyond. A dozen strides had me at the crossroads I'd spied on the fortress plans, where I slowed for a heartbeat as my cloak swirled around me. A squad of armed guards – *good mail and helmets, longswords*, the calm part of me assessed – was hurrying towards me from the right side, blades bare. I was already pivoting towards the left, though, down another hall that ought to be bring me to the bastion that was our way out. The door to it was open and it looked empty, not a single rack of spears disturbed or table toppled. Archer's head popped out with a wary look on it a heartbeat later, which at least told me the two of them had won their scrap inside.

"Bard's here," I hissed, rushing through the doorway.

Three corpses, cleanly killed, waited for me inside along my two companions. Archer began stringing her shortbow, a grim look on her face. Akua was leaning over the edge of a bare stone window overlooking the courtyard, the rope end of a fastened grappling hook in hand. She withdrew, cocking a questioning eyebrow at me.

"Bard," I simply repeated. "Courtyard?"

"Unfortunate," she said. "Seven guards. There were more but the alarm ward drew them in."

That was a sort of silver lining, I supposed. I hesitated for a beat. Keeping the corpses in my shadow was now meaningless, since the defenders already knew there'd been intruders. Discretion was out. This could still be salvaged if we got into the streets and hit the ground running, though. Wolof was a big city and Sargon's people couldn't be everywhere. Besides, our arranged distraction should be starting any moment now.

"We punch through," I ordered. "Leave the bodies."

Akua nodded.

"Two mages," she said, glancing at Archer.

"Got it," Indrani easily replied.

She took the rope Akua offered her and hoisted herself atop the windowsill before dropping down.

"I'll go after," I said, idly closing the door into the bastion behind me. "Bring the rope when you follow, would you?"

"How very frugal of you," she replied, eyes amused.

I toppled a table, shoving it in the way of the door, and rolled my eye at her. What, did she think this stuff grew on trees? Good rope was *expensive*. I sheathed my sword, hearing the sound of hurrying soldiers catching up, and headed to the window. I got to the edge just in time to see Archer leap out of a smooth slide down the rope, an arrow nocked and loosed before anyone could notice. By the time I'd begun climbing down she'd landed smoothly on the ground, having loosed a second and killed twice. There was shouting from the rest of the guards. Without the mages in the way, though, Akua could move freely. I let myself go into a controlled slide that burned at the palms of my hand, hearing the door burst open when I was barely halfway through.

Swearing, I looked up and saw Akua flow over the edge of the window. She dislodged the hook, narrowly dodging a sword blow, and I swore even louder as my slide turned into a freefall. I pulled at motes of Night, whispering a curt prayer – *grant me at least a beggar's miracle, you stingy carrion sisters* – and dragging the slightest bit to me. I shaped a thin downwards panel of darkness and angled my fall, tumbling down atop it into a disastrous roll that scraped my trouser against stone. It'd shaken and almost broken: the fortress wards were disrupting it, making it unstable. I rose to my feet, bad leg burning, and even as the Night-working evaporated behind me I was forced to hurriedly unsheathe my sword.

I caught the blow at a weak angle, the side of my own blade almost biting into my shoulder, but I spun as I took a small step to the side. The pressure from the taller and larger dark-skinned soldier trying to hack at me was turned against him, making him stumble, and I finished it with a manoeuvre I must have practiced a thousand times. As he stumbled forward I finished my spin and withdrew my sword, so that when the soldier steadied his footing and began to turn I was already hacking into the exposed side of his neck. It was a quick blow, and quite lethal. Without batting an eye I moved on. Archer had killed two more before a survivor got close enough to make her drop her bow and unsheathed her longknives, I saw, and the last one was coming for me.

Brave of him not to run, I thought, but not particularly wise.

Akua landed behind me, the soft noise of it entirely on purpose, and in the moment that drew his attention I struck. He was a big man, muscled, but clearly used to fighting with a shield he didn't currently have. When I feigned at his left he overcommitted, hacking at a blow that didn't come, and instead I quickly stepped into his guard and slammed the side of his chin two-handed with the pommel of my sword. He dropped, stunned but still conscious. From the corner of my eye I saw movement at the window above, but the arrow that was fire was knocked off-course by the one Archer loose in answer. Too quick to even be able to tell who they'd been aiming at. Time to go.

I glanced down at the soldier below, saw the fear in his eyes and hardened my heart. No witnesses: the guards above hadn't seen us up close and we wore cloaks, but this one would have descriptions. My arm rose, but a soft hand laid against it. I looked at Akua with surprise.

"There would be no point," she spoke in Kharsum. "Sargon will have the corpses upstairs raised to interrogate them."

I hid my startlement. It was not so rare a thing for her to preach mercy, not compared to the way she'd been when we were younger, but I'd not expected it here and now. I looked at the soldier, lowering my arm.

"Looks like it's your lucky day," I said in Mthethwa.

He grimaced, mouth bloody from my blow.

"I traded for this shift," he replied. "So not *that* lucky."

I grinned, brushing past him, and overheard him whispering something to Akua as he inclined his head. *Miyetham Sahelian*, or something close to it. No idea what it meant, aside the fact it looked like he'd guessed Akua's identity even through her disguise appearance. People spoke Mthethwa differently here than they did in Ater and among the Legions, I sometimes had trouble with their pronunciation. She did not answer and we wasted no time fleeing into the street before the archer up in the bastion could start shooting at us again. The street outside the bastion was board, almost an avenue, but mostly empty of people. The two young girls carrying urns of water made themselves scarce when we came out, Akua wordlessly taking the lead.

We'd barely run ten feet when lights began pulsing in the sky above the fortress. I almost grinned. The timing was a little off, but it looked like our distraction was finally happening. Hierophant would be hammering at the city through a ritual using the waters of the aqueduct as a battering ram to smash the inside of the fortress, even as troops began emerging from the Ways in a position to capitalize on the breach should it happen. The plan was for the Wolofites to repulse the assault and blame any damage on the aqueduct grids we'd nipped coming in on Masego's assault, but we'd strayed off path some. Still, the threat of an outright attack ought to bump us down Sargon's priority list a bit.

At the very least we'd have fewer pursuers, since the commander there would want to avoid thinning their garrison.

Pursuit still poured out of the same gate we'd used before we'd even turned the corner. I wasn't much of a runner these days, but I grit my teeth and pushed through the pain as we followed Akua into the neat labyrinth that was the streets of Wolof. Our enemies weren't any slower than we were, but we could take

shortcuts they couldn't – three brave souls followed even when Archer took me by the waist and leapt atop a wall, climbing as quick as they could, but we lost them three streets down when we got to a rooftop. It was one of those gardens I'd seen from afar, a lovely little shaded enclave where flowers and cabbage grew, and the three people in it when we intruded froze.

The oldest among them, a white-haired old man, deliberately looked away from us and began to speak of the weather with the younger pair. I snorted, taking it as the tacit invitation to move on that it was. The old man ignored Archer's friendly wave, stubbornly looking away, and Akua guided us southwards through rooftops and streets until we found a deserted corner. We paused there, catching our breaths and allowing our heartbeats to slow.

"We are near a bazaar, unless Sargon change the trade-rights for this district," Akua said. "The two of you will be able to change clothes there."

"You could go buy them for us," I suggested. "It'd draw less attention."

She shook her head.

"There are city guards at the bazaar," she said, "and it is only a matter of time before the fortress garrison sends warning to all companies, if they haven't already. There are scrying posts at regular intervals in the city, all with runners at hand. They will begin looking around soon, and this is not a true hiding place."

I felt a sliver of envy at the system described. Laure was nowhere as well-organized. It wasn't that we didn't have the ability, at least not in principle – we had the people and the magic. Callow just didn't have the coin to spare for something that sophisticated, not when there were a hundred other things being neglected that were arguably more important.

"I'm not keen on splitting up," Archer said, "but in that little description you did mention that there were guards at that bazaar you want us headed to."

"Only entrances and exits, most likely," I noted. "She thinks it'll be easy to disappear into the crowd and come out less conspicuously dressed."

"My very thoughts," Akua smiled.

It always startled me how easy it was to understand her, to think along the same lines. Hakram probably knew me better, but sometimes I wondered if I didn't understand *her* better than I did him. It made him a better right hand, of course – his ability to think differently than I did, to see what I didn't, was a

priceless asset – but the ease with which I could follow Akua Sahelian's thoughts felt oddly intimate. It made it dangerously easy to feel close to her.

"It's boring when you two agree," Indrani complained, then turned serious. "Let me have a look at that entrance, at least. I want to be sure they're not already looking for us."

"Good idea," I admitted.

Akua offered no objection, and after she gave a brisk description of the easiest path to the bazaar Archer was gone. I leaned against a rough brick wall, earning a raised eyebrow for it. Even when it wasn't her face it was still her mannerisms, which made it a little uncanny to look at.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Just curious," I grunted. "The guard we spared, what was it he said? In don't know what 'miyetham' means."

"It is an archaic form of the words," Akua said. "What he said was 'mile thaman'."

My brow creased.

"Always good?" I hazarded.

"Ever worthy," she corrected, then hesitated. "It is a turn of phrase here in Wolof. It is... praise for my family, in a way."

*Ever worthy, Sahelian*, I mentally completed. That was what the man had said. Considering she'd likely saved his life I wasn't inclined to argue.

"I sometimes forget your High Seats are actually liked by the people here," I admitted. "I'm so used to seeing them as the enemy that it's hard to conceive of anyone looking up to them as protectors."

"We know better than to be devils to our own, Catherine," Akua smiled, almost ruefully. "It is why we do best with enemies. That we may pour the venom outwards, while the wonders we bring back to our homes."

"Dragons risible

Our claws, swords

Stealing miracles

To better hoard," I quoted, the Taghrebi stiff on my tongue for lack of practice.

Something like delight flicked across her face, gone in a wink.

"One of Sherehazad's," she said, approving. "Not without reason was she titled the Seer."

A moment of comfortable silence passed.

"You ever miss it, this place?" I asked, half on a whim.

Her expression was hard to read, and not for the shade of the alley.

"Sometimes," Akua quietly said. "Parts of it. Others I am not so sure I could suffer now that I have known the world beyond the Sererian Walls."

I slowly nodded.

"And you?" she smiled. "Do you miss Laure?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"No," I admitted. "Laure's just a different fight to me, now. It's the court and trying to keep Callow whole. I miss the parts I loved when I was a kid, but the city? No."

It hadn't been home in a long time, though it galled me to admit it even in the privacy of my own mind. I'd never felt as more than a guest in the old palace of the Fairfaxes, a child putting on adult's clothing, and these days what I loved most in the world was condensed into the shape of a few people. I was still fond of the city, it had been my home once, but I would not weep to leave it after the war ended. The conversation ended with Archer's sudden return, but to me it felt only half-done. Like we'd left bits of it still hanging in the air. Now was not the time, though, so when Indrani informed us that the handful of guards at the bazaar entrance looked too bored to have been warned I went with the flow.

We were waved through nonchalantly by the pair of guards standing in the shadow of the arch leading into the marketplace, neither bothering to look if we were armed. Akua noticed my surprise as we entered the bazaar and leaned close for an explanation.

"Our clothes are of fine make," she explained. "It is expected of us to bear weapons."

"They thought we were highborn?" I asked.

"Not *that* fine a make," she laughed. "They believed us mfuasa, likely. Some lord's retainers."

I nodded and followed her, letting the noises of the bazaar wash over me. I'd thought it would be a strange and exotic place,

somewhere out of a dream, but I found the reality of it rather more sedate. The stands were a great deal more colourful than back home, and often made with only bare bones of wood while walls and roofs were dyed cloth, but aside from that it was mostly the goods sold that made a difference. There was no food to be bought here, as sale of such goods was strictly regulated in Wolof and contained to specific markets in every district, but there were enough spices on display to make a Callowan merchant weep for the wealth.

Jewelry was terrifyingly common too, copper and silver most of all but some gold and precious stones as well. Everyone seemed able to afford it. Clothes and cloth hung everywhere, small glassworks and the kind of petty trinkets that every market in the world must sell. The other great surprise was the sale of enchanted goods, and I wasn't talking about magic swords. For every glinting dagger there were a dozen ever-sharp kitchen knives. I saw stone coldboxes engraved with runes, prettily sculpted magelights and even alchemical brews. They were bartered over like cabbage in swift-spoken Mthethwa, like it was the most natural thing in the world to have a cure for the cold bottled in a bazaar stand. Maybe it was, I thought. There were no priests here – where else were people meant to go, when they were sick or wounded? It was still surreal, to see magic taken as something so... common. Nine in ten of those people wouldn't be mages either, it was just that magic was utterly mundane to them.

Perhaps the bazaar was a strange place after all, under that veneer of familiarity.

Akua took the initiative to buy us clothes and cloak and I was disinclined to argue. Or particularly surprised she did not even need to press clothes against me to know whether or not they'd fit. We paid in Imperial coinage, silver denarii that Malicia herself had pushed into Callow some years past in a bid to bind us more closely to the Tower, and Akua got us bags for our old clothing too. I left in a burnished yellow cloak and matching tunic, keeping only my boots and trousers, while Indrani ended up in a nice pale green. I got the impression from some of the looks the merchant gave us that he believed us to be, uh, *consorts* that that a young noblewoman was dressing more to her tastes. We picked up a few tricks to hide our appearance too, cosmetics that were quickly applied.

We slipped out of the market through another entrance and took to the streets, the two of them already knowing where we needed to go without my saying: we'd come to steal two things, after all, and one would be easier to get at than the other.

—

Within moments of having a good look at the granaries, it was plain we weren't getting into them today.

The Sahelians had their own private reserves near the palaces, according to Akua, but the 'city' granaries were a set of seven large interlocking warehouses surrounded by a low stone wall. There were three large avenues leading out, each large enough for two wagons to pass on them simultaneously, and a handful of smaller doors. The whole place was warded up to its neck, though it wasn't all about keeping people out. A lot of it was mundane utility: wards against vermin, or to keep the warehouses dry and cool. The thresholds weren't too strong, considering wagons had to be able to come in and out easily for distribution, but the walls were anchors for some pretty nasty stuff even by Praesi standards.

Still, we'd planned for this. The granary was one of the few places that'd been kept entirely intact during the mess that saw Sargon replace High Lady Tasia, so the wards there hadn't changed in the slightest since Akua had last seen them. We'd schemed a way in a weakness, as with use of the right magical trinket we believed we could trigger the ward in very specific manner and cross before it reset, and even prepared an escape plan. It was all useless now. The entire district was on high alert, even a fool could have seen it. Hundreds of household guards had come to reinforce the garrison and what must be a staggering amount of mages with them: there were balls of light hovering ten feet above the wall, at least a hundred of them, and the spell was one known to Akua.

"The colour will change if there is movement where the light extends," she said. "It should last for at least an hour, and if they've any sense they will have staggered putting the spells up so that they can be smoothly replaced."

High Lord Sargon had been distastefully competent so far, so I'd go ahead and assume they had. I still sent out Archer to have a closer look. Even if I had my doubts she'd find a blind spot, learning more about the defences in place couldn't hurt. There was no way to tell how long Sargon would keep the reinforcements there and we could only risk staying in the city for so long. Our foes were looking for us, and eventually our luck would run out. Archer came back after half an hour, looking displeased.

"The place is sealed up tighter than a tomb," Indrani reported. "They've actually closed up all the small access doors, the only way's in through the big gates now."

"That's a problem," I admitted.

We simply did not have the strength to smash our way through here.

"Did you get close enough to eavesdrop?" Akua asked.

Archer nodded.



"Nothing too exciting, the usual whining and a bit of fear at the notion of facing us," Indrani said. "I think I've figured out why the bazaar guards hadn't been warned yet: a lot of them complained about being yanked away from other assignments in the city and sent here in a hurry. I'm thinking Sargon put his scrying stations to work sending people to this place instead of looking for us."

My lips thinned. I did hate fighting clever opponents, they were always such a pain. Akua's cousin was proving to be one of that breed, having correctly deduced what we'd come here for and that it was a better bet to protect it than comb through half the city looking for us.

"We're not going to make it in there," I finally said. "And I'm betting he's going to be willing to keep his people here as long as it takes while he's looking for us."

If we were threatening an assault on his walls it might force him to pull away people, but we both knew the Army of Callow wasn't going to try anything of the sort. He could afford to keep his mages here instead of manning the ramparts, the tricky fucker.

"He will have the treasury vaults under reinforced guard as well," Akua quietly said. "This is something of a setback."

It was. We'd come here for grain and gold, and now it was looking like we were going to have to leave without either. Considering Marshal Nim had torched a third of our supplies, coming out of here empty-handed was going to be a blow. Not necessarily the end of our campaign, but it'd stiffen odds that were already against us. Even aside from simple logistics, running away from Wolof with our tail tucked after we'd swaggered wasn't going to be a good luck when we were courting allies. Some of the Clans might reconsider raiding, if it looked like Malicia was winning this war, and I needed the orcs south for more reasons than I'd admitted. I bit my lip, mind spinning in circles. I couldn't see another way, much as retreat would be a bitter pill to swallow.

"We shouldn't stay here," Archer said. "Let's find a place to settle for the day, yeah? We can figure out our next move then."

I nodded, silent, and followed them deeper into the city. There had to be a way, right? I tried to put together another plan, another trick, yet all I could think of was the sound of an old monster tuning a lute.

—

The search was spreading out.

There were parties on the streets now, squads of twenty with two mages. The caster regularly stopped and cast a spell with no

visible manifestation save a spinning circle of golden light, and it was magic none of us knew. Archer wandered close once or twice as we headed towards the southwest of the city, but she got nothing out of idle chatter.

"I'd wager the circle is a focus mark, not unlike a rune," Akua mused. "The purpose remains rather more elusive."

"It's got to be a detection spell of some sort," I said. "Sargon has to know finding us in a city this large will be Hells otherwise, especially when we have you guiding us around."

"What it might detect is the question, then," Akua said.

We had no answer, so steering clear was the best move. We were nearly at our destination anyhow. When I'd first been told that Wolof did not have slums, I'd naturally been pretty skeptical. All cities had slums, even walled ones, it was just a matter of how large they got. Wolof wasn't as much of an exception as Akua believed it to be, but she'd not been entirely *wrong* either – even Scribe had agreed. The Sahelians had a pair of districts called the Yumban in the southeast of the city, where people who'd usually end up on the streets or in slums were assigned to live. Accommodations were provided, if very basic ones, and food from the city granaries regularly doled out. It all sounded very charitable, which naturally meant it wasn't the whole story.

Any people who lived there were essentially at the mercy of the Sahelians. By law they could not refuse military service if called on, or a servant's station, and they could even be traded to other lords so long as work was guaranteed by the receiving lord. People regularly made it out of the Yumban into higher station – mages in particular – and Wolofites were proud of such success stories, but the truth was most people didn't. By design, presumably, so that if the Sahelians ever had an urgent need of manpower they had a source at hand that drawing on would not cause unrest. Conscription in the city would be taken badly, but who would object to the Yumban being emptied? It was clever, in a heinous sort of way, which I was coming to learn was the mark of the most successful nobles of Praes.

Most of the people in the Yumban *now* weren't actually from Wolof, though. I caught the difference as we crossed into the edge of the districts. They favoured greens and dark oranges over the yellows and reds I'd seen earlier, the cadence and wording in Mthethwa was different – easier to understand for me, it was closer to the Ater-and-Legion standard I'd learned – and there were almost no weapons anywhere. Sargon had taken to raiding the northern hinterlands of Aksum on Malicia's behalf as part of his support in the civil war, and I was looking at part of the loot he'd carried back with him: people. It wasn't just Aksumites, of course, that was a riot waiting to happen. But I'd wager that we

were looking at the 'prizes' who'd not had a trade he could offer them a shop for

Day labourers, farmhands, those whose trade was not lacking in Wolof.

They were not mistreated and I saw little resentment, not the kind you saw back home when a town despised their lord, but I could almost feel it from the air that Sargon Sahelian's authority ran thinner here. Perhaps not much hatred, but not much love either. Their abductor had not delivered them unto a paradise. There was a lot of room, at least, since entire streets of the Yumban were still empty. The city had not entirely required from the brutalities of Tasia's fall. Akua guided us carefully, keeping out of sight where we could as she explained what she was looking for.

"We'll pick a place near a *kufuna*," she said.

I knew the word, though I'd never seen one myself. Black had mentioned that sometimes people from them had trouble adapting at the War College, where the ways were rather different.

"Those are the noble-backed schools, right?" I asked.

The Tower had 'free' schools of its own, where people could be attend in exchange for sworn years of service – it was how Tyrants could recruit mages without asking them of High Lords or drawing on Ater – but *kufuna* belonged to noble houses, without anyone else having a say in their running or what they taught.

"It is more nuanced than that," Akua murmured. "But you are not incorrect. People in those streets will be used to strangers coming and going, less likely to pay it attention."

"Never did get to see one of those," Archer mused. "We should have a look."

She demurred, but I was curious myself. We settled on studying one from a distance, but it turned out to be even easier than that. Such a 'school' was in session on large paved open grounds between two sets of houses and we found good lodgings in a second-story place that had a window looking down over the lesson. It was little more than a large room meant for eating and two adjoining smaller nooks for people to sleep in, but the narrow stairs to the rooftops had us sold. Building were smaller in the Yumban than in the districts around it – I felt, impossibly that the rest of the city was somehow looking down on us – but within the districts themselves it'd be a good way to get around. After dark, anyway.

We dropped our packs and settled in, quickly figuring out why both stories of the building were still empty even though the

convenience of closeness to the kufuna must have made it in demand: one of the nooks had been fouled by an animal pretty disgustingly. That could have been cleaned, even if it hadn't been, but the way the light pit in the middle of the combined house had a wooden cover that moved in the wind and slammed with a bam-bam-bam sound out of nowhere sometimes would have been trickier to handle. I could already tell it was going to get on my nerves. I went into the clean nook, which had the overlooking window, and cast a curious look.

It wasn't that large a window, so when Indrani and Akua came too we had to squeeze pretty tight.

They were doing mathematics, the poor fuckers. Maybe thirty 'students' whose ages looked to vary between eight-ish to fourteen were sitting on the ground, using nice writing slates and chalk. The teacher was an old woman at least into her sixties, who leaned on a cane – lucky her, hadn't been able to bring my staff – and had cataracts in her eyes but looked pretty spry otherwise. She guided her students through the end of a lesson on multiplication, and it was when students were called on to answer questions that the difference to what I was used to came in.

"The only a kid handling with the black stone can answer," I muttered. "Why?"

It wasn't always the same, either. Sometimes children answered two questions in a row before passing to another, sometimes it was immediate but never once did the teacher actually order it passed.

"It is because of *jino-waza*," Akua said. "I am not surprised the rules are unclear to you."

I frowned. It was familiar, the words. I'd read them before, if only in passing.

"The clear-eyes," Indrani snorted. "The Lady talked about it. It's a little like the way we did thing in Refuge."

"I can't see them keeping score over anything," I said. "What's it do?"

"It is not a game, not exactly," Akua hesitated. "It is philosophy, at least in part. To display your skills, your knowledge. To assess where you stand in regard to your peers. The stone and questions are just a tool to ease this."

I studied the students, eyes narrowed.

"They're all eager to answer," I said.

Which was not my experience with studies. The tutors the orphanage made us sit in front of were used to squirming pupils wanting to be elsewhere, and they used questions as a way to keep us in line. Listen, learn, or you'll look like an idiot in front of the others.

"So they win something by doing it," I said. "Esteem, maybe? They can't trade that for something useful, though, and it's a little abstract for kids."

"It is training for the world beyond the lessons," Akua said. "The teacher, she will remember the one who distinguish themselves. What they are good at. And when my family – or someone with a trade and no children – sends someone, wanting a candidate for a scribe's apprentice or kitchen attendant, she will give those names. She holds opportunities."

I chewed my lip.

"So the stone, it's part of the test too," I finally said. "*Jino-waza*. Sure, a clever kid could keep it for a long while – but then you hog the opportunity, and no one will ever pass you the stone. They're trading it like adults would trade favours."

"Exactly," Akua grinned. "A student who oversteps might even find themselves sabotaged, as it often is with those who act in such ways in higher stations. It teaches balance, to take opportunity without making enemies."

"Teaches who's worth making allies with, too," Archer quietly said. "Not everyone's good at the same things, you can scratch each other's back in a way that everyone wins."

She had a strange, almost fragile look on her face as she looked at the kids. Was she thinking of Refuge? I spoke up to move the conversation along, even knowing that Akua was unlikely to ever be so uncouth as to comment on the look that'd seized our friend's face.

"Everyone you're allied with, at least," I scoffed. "It's not without sense, but it's a very Praesi way of doing things."

"I have seen the schools of your people, dearest, what few you have," Akua reminded me. "They are as menageries. Kufuna are a better way. Your nobles have their tutors, as we do, but learning is simply not prized west the Wasaliti the way that it should be."

"I came out of my schooling just fine," I replied, a tad defensive. "And orphanages gave educations even before Black stepped in, he just ensured they were *good* ones."

He'd also raised the number of them tenfold, but that was another discussion entirely. It wouldn't do to forget that my father had *made* a lot of Callowan orphans along with those orphanages.

"Come off it, Cat," Indrani snorted. "How much of what you came out having learned you learned in classes? You're like a truffle pig, you just dig into books about the stuff that you want to learn about and ignore the rest. You barely even had help when you learned Chantant."

"Thank you for the description, woman I will never sleep with again," I drily replied as she stuck out her tongue at me. "And I could have gotten more out of those classes if I'd cared about them. It was my choice not to gain, because I thought it was pointless – it'd be the War College that was make or break for me."

"Failure to motivate your student to learn is very much failure," Akua replied. "*Jino-waza* ensures that every student knows the worth of their lessons."

"It also teaches your kids to always compete with each other," I flatly said. "That they'll need to squabble with each other to gain the attention of the highborn, that it's the only way up. It sets in the bone that you swing at the people around you, not upwards. It teaches skills, too, I won't pretend otherwise. But I'm not exactly surprised those schools are backed by *nobles*."

"You do not understand," Akua gently said. "*Jino-waza* goes beyond the schools. It is everywhere, applies to everything. The lack of a stone does mean it ceases, the stone is a *teaching* tool. It is how a family knows which of them should benefit if a favour is called in, whose marriage should have the most coin spent on to arrange, who gets to eat the most when the months are lean."

"*Parents* do this?" I replied, aghast.

"Well, yeah," Indrani said, brow creased. "Makes sense, I'm not sure why you're so offended. If you get a windfall, you don't waste it on someone who won't do shit with it. Even parents can tell who's going places, Cat."

"You're not supposed to play favorites," I bit out. "Everyone gets a fair shot, that's how people who aren't obviously good at things get their chance to shine."

Did they not realize that what they were describing, it only ever benefitted the slightest bit of the people involved? Talented people would band together and help each other up while having all the incentive to kick everyone else down. And above those games you had the highborn, playing an even more lethal take on it with each other – and the ingrained notion that they should

never, ever let anyone below them come up. It could only be at their own expense.

"That's nonsense," Indrani bluntly replied.

"She is Callowan, Indrani," Akua said, and when I turned on her a thunderous scowl she raised a hand in appeasement. "I mean no insult. I am only saying that it is because you come from a land of *plenty* that think this way, dearest."

I blinked at her. A land of plenty? Had she *seen* what they sold in the bazaar. Not even the enchanted stuff, just the spices and dyes would – I stopped, elbowing aside the sharp irritation and forced myself to look at it from the Wasteland's eyes. Food, I got almost immediately. She meant food.

"It wasn't your nobles that made this," I finally said. "It's a survival teaching."

"When is the last time Callow had a major famine?" Akua asked. "It is different here. We kill to eat, to drink – the Taghreb fight wars to steal clouds from each other and make them into water! You come from a place that has the luxury of fairness, but Wolof does not. Few parts of Praes do."

"That's not the way to do it, though," I said. "You don't claw at each other, there's no winning that when it starts. You sit and figure it out together. Ration, share. Something like a famine, you're all in it together."

Splashing the mud on the others so they were deeper in wouldn't actually get you out of the pit.

"It a pleasant sentiment," Akua replied, "but it does not help to choose which belly should be filled by the rice bowl. Jino-waza does. It lets you make the decision with clear eyes – and they *will* have to make it in their lifetime, Catherine. Everyone in this city older than forty, before Callowan grain was brought in, has known hunger."

"Not the nobles," I sharply smiled.

"Not my kin, the Sahelians are too wealthy for it," she agreed. "But lesser lords, ruling over poorer lands? It is not as uncommon as you think. The fields feed everyone, Catherine, and no granary lasts forever. We make many wonders, but not even we can make wheat sprout out of rock."

It would have been a better use of their skills in magic to learn that rather than fucking diabolism, I thought, but that was unfair. Destructive magic was easier. You needed to know a lot less to toss a fireball than, say, heal a broken bone. I could see it writ in the long of history, how it would have gone: the

people and places inclined to the peaceful solution, to make wheat sprout from rock, they wouldn't last. Not when a less scrupulous rival could come in, throw a few fireballs and take everything. It wasn't as easy as raising castle walls with this. Magic was *expensive*, and Praesi were rich but not with bottomless purses.

So you got better at the magics that could protect you and destroy your rivals, and then maybe if you rose high enough that you were beyond most threats you could afford to go looking for wonders. Answers beyond eating the other crabs in the bucket. It was not happenstance, I thought, that the Sahelians had the finest field rituals in Praes. But by the time you got safe enough to look for those wonders, were you still the same people who'd wanted them in the first place? I felt an unpleasant shiver of sympathy at the thought. I was not an unfamiliar tale I was spinning there.

"It doesn't need to stay like this," I said. "Older than forty, you said. We had two decades of peace and trade, and that changed things."

"It did," Akua murmured. "Mother used to think it softened us, made us lose our edge, but I disagree. It freed us to pursue different things. To consider beyond the immediate."

I cast a long look at the kids below, fingers tight against the windowsill. The teacher had move on from mathematics, she was speaking of early Praesi history – the campaigns that brought the Grey Eyries into Praes not so long after its founding – as she regularly stopped for questions and jino-waza considered to unfold before my eyes. I couldn't have fixed this place even if I thought it was my duty to do it, I admitted to myself. There was so much of Praes that was still unknown to me. Parts of I knew like the back of my hand, the Legions and the lore and bloody embrace with my own home, but it wasn't enough. Akua had thought I might be Dread Empress once, climb the Tower, but it would have been madness.

I was glad I had not heard the song in years.

No, what I was meant to do out east was not put on some saviour's cloak and pretend I had the answers. I was here to bind the Dread Empire to the Liesse Accords, to the war against Keter, and to topple the empress who'd been such a thorn in our sides. Beyond that, I must remember restraint. It was not my land here, and in some ways I just... thought differently. And did not quite understand how they did. There was more to the differences between Callow and Praes than weather and colours. I shook my head, shaking off the thoughts.

"We should plan out our next move," I finally said, pushing away from the window. "We'll want to move under cover of dark."



"A shame I cannot use the family library," Akua said. "Half an hour there and I would know the nature of the spell the patrols are using to hunt us."

Indrani snorted.

"Yeah well, if we were in there we could just stroll up to the gold and take it," she said.

I smiled, only half-listening.

"The library is in an entirely different wing than the treasury vaults," Akua chided. "It is much too-"

I turned to look at her so quickly my neck almost cracked.

"Wait," I interrupted. "The library, you told me it was over the vaults."

"The artefact vaults, yes," the shade said. "The treasury is nowhere near these. It is not the cleverest of notions to keep demons near one's coinage."

Oh, I thought. *Oh*. Sargon thought we were going for the grain and the treasury, so that was the parts he was protecting. But he had to be stretched tight with people, going all out on the defence of those two places and looking for us in the streets with yet more mages. He couldn't cover everything, so he'd focused on guarding what we were after. That meant thinning the defences elsewhere. And though we could get to neither the granaries nor the treasury, what was more important than either of those things to the enduring power of the Sahelians? I met their gazes with my eye, grinning wide.

"I have a plan," I said.

Well, I could have done without the groaning.

## Chapter 8: Access

*"Note: Cousin Onoko's assertion that 'blood is thicker than water' was in fact correct, despite my initial assumption otherwise. Add in the silence that followed the experiment, and it can be considered an unequivocal success."*

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

The ruling seat of the Sahelians was called the Emyrean Palace. Pretentious fucking name really, even if it was probably as fancy as it sounded, but no one had asked me. Not that it'd ever stopped me from sharing my thoughts before, or in this particular case. Strangely enough, Akua disagreed with me. The palace's

foundations were the oldest in the city, and though it'd begun small over the centuries it had turned into a real behemoth of a place. That was an advantage in the sense that it was difficult to entirely prevent entry into it, as there were simply too many entrances and too many people using them, but the rulers of Wolof had seen to their defences with characteristic thoroughness. Akua drew at knifepoint in the dirt of our quarters' floor, first outlining three squares in a loose but noticeable curve.

"The Empyrean Palace is divided into seven different wings," she said. "These three are the outer section, the easiest to access. The central wing contains greeting halls, but the rest is places of little importance – servant quarters and stables, courtyards and gardens."

"We'd planned to go through the eastern wing, right?" Archer asked, crouched over the drawing.

With her unstrung bow kept on top of her knees, she looked like she was crouching by a campfire instead of a loose plan.

"We did," I agreed. "And odds are we still will. It's heavy on gardens, so it'll be easier to sneak through."

"The difficulty begins when we are inside the western wing," Akua said.

She drew small lines connecting the three squares, standing for open paths and halls.

"Getting into any of these wings from the outside is achievable, but movement between the wings is strictly limited," Akua elaborated. "Each of them has its own largely independent staff, largely to prevent infiltrations like ours – unknown faces are simply not allowed through. Which leaves us only one direction to go in."

She drew a rectangle vertically, nestled against the squares like a hammer's handle, and the deftly connected the three squares to it by single strokes.

"This is the Grand Gallery," the golden-eyed woman said. "It is the sift through which sneaks and agents are removed before they can reach the vital sections of the palace. It bears the great hall where formal banquet are held. Adjoining it are both the public kitchens and a set of private parlours. No guard or servant can enter the Gallery without holding an enchanted token, given out by the steward of another wing. Being caught without one means arrest if you are lucky, but most often summary execution."

I went fishing through the bag where the last two vials of the water breathing potion were and produced three small copper

amulets. Detailed engravings were around the rim, and at the centre a single pearl bore a small enchantment. I set them down besides the plan.

"Scribe obtained these tokens for us," I said. "They're imitations, but very good ones. Eyes of the Empire have used them with success in the past."

The enchantments usually changed every few months, I'd been told, and Sargon had kept to that pattern. In the wake of his chaotic ascension to power, however, the Eyes had been able to subvert people in a few key mage cadres. The fakes were current, as even though Scribe had lost control of the spy network in Praes to Lady Ime she still had... contacts. Favours for call in that she'd kept for a rain day.

"That gets us into the Gallery," Akua agreed. "But not forward. To leave the Grand Gallery and move deeper into the palace, one must pass through one of the three threshold-gates. Each is warded, and there is no enchanted ward key: the only way not to be affected is to be keyed in with blood at the appropriate ward stone well beyond the corresponding gate."

She drew three small arcing slices above the rectangle, then a square facing each. The moment she finished, she cut through the left square with a decisive stroke.

"Issa's Garden has served as the personal quarters to the ruling Sahelian and their direct family for the last century and a half, but it was where my mother made her death-grounds," Akua calmly said. "Even after years of ritual purging, there are still motes of taint and so the ruins remain unused."

She drew a stroke through the centre square.

"The Emyrean Hall is the heart of the palace," she continued. "It holds many of the wonders my kin have accumulated over the years, including the enchanted ceiling for which the palace is named. Sargon will be using the old formal living quarters that were raised there and it is also where the treasury vault."

"We had an in there," I said. "I have a bottle of blood from a servant who is keyed into the wards, and I've learned a Night-trick that could exploit that to sneak us in with a little help from my patronesses. The trouble is that right now that place will be fucking packed to the gills. Forget the wards, it's the guards that would be a problem."

Akua withdrew her dagger, smoothly rising to her feet. As if to distance herself from the entire mess, she even took a step back to lean against the wall and arc an eyebrow at me.

"So you want us to hit the last wing," Archer nodded, looking at me.

"The Vaults," I said. "It's partially a mage village, partially a large library and underneath are all the artefacts the Sahelians believe too precious to see the light of day."

"Or too dangerous," Akua pointedly said. "If Sargon succeeded at binding Insipientia again, its artefact-prison will be there. The Weeping Snares he used when he came to parley are kept in a vault there, and so are over a dozen other makings in the same league."

"So we what, release all these beasties into the library?" Indrani asked, frowning. "I guess it'd be a kick in the guts – Hells, if they get loose it'll bring the city to its knees – but it doesn't sound like your usual plans. Gonna be a lot of dead servants to go with the dead soldiers and the dead mages."

A lot worse than that, should a demon be loosed in the city once more.

"No," I said. "We're going to steal the library, Indrani. All of it. And then, to make it clear I'm in a foul mood, we're going to rob the artefact vaults too."

Indrani laughed, openly delighted, but this was a more calculated move than she might think. I'd be holding two knives at High Lord Sargon's throat by clearing those out, though he wouldn't realize quite how bad it was until we sat at the negotiating table again. Akua cleared her throat.

"I have no opposition to such a plan in principle," she said. "But in practice, I have a question: how are we going to get past the ward?"

She pointed at the threshold-gate leading into the Vaults. You know, that gate we didn't have a handy blood vial for that'd maybe allow us to trick the wards. Servants never got keyed into two wardstones, presumably in case of this very sort of situation.

"I don't have a way to get us past the ward," I bluntly said.

The admission took them both aback.

"But," I continued, "I know some people who *can* get past them."

The Eyes of the Empire had people in the mage cadres that enchanted the tokens for the outer palace, and those mage cadres lived in the Vaults. Meaning that the Eyes had an in. And, as it happened, we knew where their safehouses in Wolof were – it paid to have the woman who'd first set them up in your service.

"And how are you going to get them to help us?" Akua skeptically asked.

"I am going to use," I toothily grinned, "tact and diplomacy."

—

Night sunk deep into the wood, spreading out in wavy cracks, and a heartbeat later the floor shattered.

We dropped down in a rain of shards and broken floorboards, landing in the middle of what looked more like some tavern's common room than the spy hideout it was. I landed on the table, swallowing a moan of pain — Gods but I wished I could have brought my staff into Wolof — while Archer threw herself on a surprised man and knocked him down. Akua already had a knife at the throat of a second when I checked, which left me the two seated at the table on which I now stood. Wait, no, only one. The woman in the dress had been knocked unconscious by a falling floorboard. That left only the bearded man in front of me, who was currently gaping and bleeding from the face where a wood shard had flown into his cheek.

"Good evening, Eyes of the Empire," I cheerfully said. "Who's in charge here?"

The young woman — barely more than a teenager — that Akua had a knife on began tearing up. She was shaking, obviously terrified.

"Please don't hurt us," she hurried out. "We'll be Eyes if you want us to, I'm sure you're right."

"*I curse you to be silent,*" I spoke in Crepuscular, and Night flared.

Her mouth kept moving, but not a sound followed. The flash of horror in her eyes then was significantly more genuine than the previous theatrics. The man at my feet had his hand on the handle of a knife, but he stopped short of unsheathing it when he saw I'd caught him.

"So not her," I said, cocking an eyebrow. "Did she seriously think that would work?"

It wasn't like we'd picked this place out of a hat.

"She is young," the bearded man sighed. "Good evening, Your Majesty. For the sake of this conversation, you may consider me to be in charge."

Meaning he likely wasn't. I glanced at the unconscious woman to his left and then at the poor bastard that Archer had in an absent-minded stranglehold, then decided there was no point in pushing for someone else to speak.

"Name?" I asked.

"I am Ekon, Your Majesty," he said.

I met his eyes with mine.

"If I have you a choice between doing me a favour and having your soul fed to Sve Noc, Ekon," I said. "Which would you end up leaning, d'you think?"

He swallowed drily, but his face remained admirably calm. He must have been his forties, I thought, but his age was not wearing hard on him. Spying must pay well.

"All things considered, Your Majesty," he said, "I would be inclined to the favour."

"Good man," I smiled, and moved to ease myself down the table.

I dropped down the floor by the unconscious woman, studying her in passing just to be sure she wasn't faking. No, it looked quite genuine: her head was swelling where she'd been struck, which would be very difficult to fake, and her hand was not clutching a knife but a... pipe? I leaned in close and sniffed. Well, I'd be damned. For the what, probably the third time now? Still, Below was smiling on me tonight. I snatched up the pipe, which was already filled with wakeleaf, and offered my good friend Ekon a smile.

"Don't worry about it, I'm not asking you to turn on Malicia," I said. "Nothing quite so troublesome."

"I am glad to hear it," the man cautiously ventured.

I passed a hand over the pipe, fire flickering in its wake, and grinned around the mouth of my pipe as I breathed in deep of my vice. Ah, that hit the spot.

"Now," I said, "let's talk about how you're going to get us into the Vaults."

Huh, I'd never seen a spy freeze in horror before. That was probably a good sign, right?

—

Ekon had been most helpful, for a man who was going to betray us before this was over.

Under cover of dusk we crept through the gardens, weaving through pools and flowerbeds laid out intricately under the shade of old, twisting trees. Stretches of lilies in pink and pale, delicate orchids in beds whose every rock was sculpted, hibiscus and hyacinth and candelabra flowers. Among them were more... exotic

breeds, flowers whose petals slowly changed colours or who moved without need for the breeze. Some even had veins of light, or sweated droplet of mist-like purple instead of dew. We steered clear of the menagerie, for it was well-guarded and there were creatures within that even we should stay wary of, and past a curving pool whose waters were full of nenuphars we took a servant's entrance into the western wing.

The pair of guards by the door studied us as we came in but said nothing. We wore servant's livery, after all. I had discarded my eyecloth in favour of a painted stone replacement from the bazaar for my missing eye, knowing it might get me recognized otherwise, and a touch of cosmetics had seen Indrani and I pass as vaguely Taghreb. The days out in the sun had tanned my skin deeper than usual, it was more the cheekbones than the colour that gave me away as being of Deoraithe extraction.

Once we were inside the western wing proper, not the outside part, we hugged the length of the servant quarters as we headed deeper in. At this time of the evening they were mostly empty, save for the children and the kinsmen raising them, so simply looking like we had a purpose was enough for the few servants we encountered to steer clear of us. Twice we encountered patrols, a handful of soldiers in Sahelian livery who lost interest in us immediately the moment Akua showed them a fake token. I was too on my guard to truly allow my gaze to drift around, but I did get glimpses of our surroundings. Tapestries were common and colourful, with complicated patterns whose motif changed from corridor to corridor. Painted wood was used as a sort of gilding along walls, and we had yet to encounter a single torch: it was all magelights.

It was almost bafflingly easy to make it into the Grand Gallery. We showed our tokens to the guards manning the hallway leading to it, faked smiles when a young man tried a joke about our 'coming here often' – he was eyeing Indrani pretty hard, but it wasn't exactly the kind of inspection we should be worried about – and were sent in. Within half an hour of having set foot in the Emyrean Palace, we we'd reached the Gallery. Akua had only described it in passing as having statues of her ancestors, but she'd undersold it significantly. The Grand Gallery was at least half a mile long and maybe half that in length? More than that, the 'statues' were in full armour and almost eerily lifelike. They were on tall pedestals, and a quick glance at the names under them told me what I was looking at: former High Lords and Ladies of Wolof.

I didn't dare linger, moving across the white and pink marble floor as quickly as I could without drawing attention. There were more people here, but the Gallery itself wasn't really bustling: it was the side parlours and the kitchens that were alive, swarming with people. I leaned closer to Akua, eyeing one of the

statues wearing colourful scale and a short sword that looked like a decent fit for me.

"Think we could grab from those before we head into the Vaults?" I murmured.

We'd had to leave behind arms and armour, which had me feeling very naked at the moment. The servant livery was pretty nice, red and white cloth with black accents, but it wouldn't stop so much as a kitchen knife – much less good steel.

"It is all cursed," Akua replied in a murmur of her own. "Every single piece. It is a rite of passage for any Sahelian capable of magic to devise a curse of their own and replace one of the fading ones when they are fifteen."

Of course it was all fucking cursed, I sighed. Mildly curious, I cast a look around.

"So who'd you curse up?" I asked.

"One of my namesakes," she smiled. "The third of that name, and most distinguished – she held Wolof against foreign armies in the wake of First Crusade."

"So what'd you put in?" Indrani asked, looking enthused. "Is it rot? It's always rot with you Praesi types."

"Partial bone liquefaction," Akua replied, sounding proud. "And I tweaked the curse so that the most common counter-spells would work, but then trigger a second curse that liquefies the skin instead."

I wrinkled my nose even as Archer let out an impressed noise. Nasty stuff. Definitely a no on nabbing weapons. We got stopped five times. The first was a simple token check, the second a warning by a pair of guards to avoid the Green Parlour – noble guests were using it – but the third almost outed us. Not because of an interrogation, but because an older servant ordered us to help him and another man carry a large wooden table into a parlour. The weight on my bad leg was atrocious, and though I kept the pain from my face the older man complained of our slow pace several times. Akua begged us off as needing to report to the Master of Ceremonies as soon as she could and we made a getaway.

Twice more we were asked to show tokens, and I noticed we were being asked more frequently than the people coming and going. I pointed out as much to Akua, who nodded.

"Our guards are trained to ask the token the moment they do not recognize a face," she explained.



Made sense, and so far the deception had held. We could only hope it'd continue to. It was near the end of the corridor, by the statue of High Lord Nassor, that we waited. Archer asked, and so we learned that the man was Akua's great grand uncle, whose daughter had been assassinated and usurped by Akua's own grandfather. Amusingly enough, Sargon was related to the man through his own mother and so it could be considered that their branch had somewhat returned to power. Sahelian family politics were like a rolling wheel of murder, it sounded like. I caught sight of someone passing through the threshold-gate to the Vaults from the corner of my eye and stiffened.

"That's her," I said. "Green stone necklace and grey robes, like our friend said."

Taiwo Bauna was a stout and respectable-looking woman into her middle age, with pale brown eyes that often saw her taken as more highborn than she actually was. By all reports, she was a fairly skilled enchanter with a good position among the enchanting cadres of the Sahelian vassal mages. She also liked losing a dice games and racking up debt doing it, apparently, which had been how the Eyes got to her. There were two guards by the door, and neither spoke a word as she passed them. She found us without difficulty, having been told of where we would be waiting. Her face was blank as she took us in, not bothering with greetings.

"You'll be bringing treats the kitchen I ordered," she said. "Honeybread, which they don't make in our own. Follow and be silent. I can only buzz the wards for three heartbeats before it triggers one of the deeper alarms, so you'll have to cross quickly."

"Understood," I simply replied.

It must not have been the first time she did this, I thought, for the wrapped and warm honeybread was waiting for us when we arrived in the kitchen. My leg complained of having to double back halfway through the Grand Gallery, but I kept myself under control. We were close, now was not the time to whine. She led the way as we returned to the threshold-gate, where we slowed. Moments before she crossed the gate, colourful lights began to swirl in the open air. The guards glanced at each other, then her. Taiwo sighed.

"I'll talk to Lord Luba," she told them. "It's been happening too often for it to be happenstance, the anchor patch must have been flawed."

"Please do," a tall man said, voice smooth. "I apologize for the delay, but you will have to wait until the lights fade before crossing."

None of us argued, and moments after the last splash of colour faded we followed Taiwo past the threshold. There was no smell of ozone, no movement of power, not a damned thing. We were *in*. We walked quickly, hurrying down an ornate hallway until we'd reached a great antechamber that Akua had described as the beginning of the Vaults. Taiwo turned towards us, snatching the wrapped honeybread out of Archer's hands.

"Tell Alazi that this settles the debt," she said. "And if she hasn't arranged someone to take the fall, I'll be selling you all out before I'm even thrown in a cell."

"Of course," I replied. "She'll be in touch."

"She better not," Taiwo Bauna darkly said, and walked away.

Well, I thought, it was a good thing we already had someone who knew her way around here. I unwrapped the honeybread, biting into the warm loaf and feeling it crunch under my teeth pleasantly. I grimaced a heartbeat later, though: way too much cinnamon and honey. Too sweet for me. I passed it to Archer, who took a bite of her own and let out a little moan of pleasure. We hadn't had time to eat, so I really wished Taiwo had picked up bowls of stew or something instead.

"Let's get moving," I said. "Akua, you know the way to the library?"

"In my sleep," she drily replied.

Not exactly a surprise. Much like Masego she was a natural talent in matters of magic, but talent wasn't enough – to become as good as she had been, when she'd still had magic, you needed to *work*. We followed her. Archer ate the entire honeybread, purely to avoid question being asked she assured us, and I let my gaze wander through the empty halls of the Vaults. Most of the mages would be eating around now, or out on duty: it was some time before we encountered another soul, and even then it was another servant.

There were no tapestries here, the walls adorned instead with mosaics and steles in a style I did not recognize – it wasn't from the Free Cities, there was no paint, but it was strikingly vivid anyway – while the ceiling above us arced gently into what appeared to be the night sky. It was a lesser form of the enchantment covering the ceiling of the Emyrean Hall, Akua told us, one that changed only between night and day. It was used by younger mages as a practice before they were allowed to work on the real masterwork. How long was it before we reached the library? I wasn't quite sure, I was tense enough time was hard to parse without focusing. Whatever the truth, we eventually came to stand before great iron gates. Twice as tall and tall as a man, they were sculpted with the figures of twisting devils offering

knowledge to men and later being made to kneel to them. I remained at a wary distance, remembering how I'd once nearly gotten myself killed by mouthing off at the Tower's front door.

"And our way in?" Indrani asked. "I'm not seeing knockers or a lock."

"It requires a spell," Akua said. "A variation on a formula taught to all who have the right to enter this hall, and which changes twice a day. Fortunately, there is a trick to it."

She laid a ghostly hand against the iron door, near a grinning devil's face, and closed her eyes. Her arm became as dark fog, flowing gently along the iron. The fog narrowed into small tendrils that went along certain lines of the sculpture – a face there, a staff or horns or a tower – and after a long time she breathed out.

"There," Akua Sahelian said, smirking a moment before a small click was heard at the gates unlatched.

I breathed out, rolled my shoulder.

"All right," I said. "Archer, you know what your job is."

"Clean-up," she grinned.

That was one way to put it.

"Akua, with me," I said. "I can't hold the entire thing in the Night, and there'd be no point. It's not the common works we're after, it's those that aren't in anyone else's library."

"I know the sections," she agreed.

And their defences too, which would be important. There was simply no way that the gates were the entire set of protections on something as essential to the Sahelians as this library. I'd bet they even encouraged young mages to sneak it past this door to sharpen them up a bit. The good stuff, though, would be kept away from where people could easily get at it.

"Then let's go," I ordered.

Archer took the lead, opening the door just enough we were able to slip through. I wasted half a heartbeat to the wonder of what I was looking at – this was large as a cathedral, and most of it books! – before focusing on the immediate. Which was a handful of white-robed scholars congregating around a great table near the entrance and paying us no attention, while a squadron of twenty guards kept watch from a raised platform to our right. Those did notice us, but the initial alarm at the sight of us somewhat faded at the sight of Akua following us in: she had changed her

appearance to be matching the white robes of the scholars here. We still got a pair of guards coming down our way, frowning.

Akua and I moved towards the scholars and Indrani towards the pair, pace brisk. I scanned the room around us, taking in the tower stacks in the middle of the great hall and the upwards layers on the walls – almost like the inside of a ship – but I found no one looking at us from there. So far our only witnesses were the people I'd seen. Four scholars, I saw, and as we approached one of them turned to us with a cocked eyebrow. He was looking at Akua, trying to place her face and failing. I was, meanwhile, looking at the table. Not the books but the rest. I found something suitable, a paring knife for quills next to an inkwell. Less than a dozen feet between us and the scholars now. From the corner of my eye I saw Indrani pass behind tall stacks, the guards catching up to her there. There wasn't a sound, but a few heartbeats later she moved out quickly and with a sword in hand. The guards above hadn't noticed a thing, and likely wouldn't until it was too late. Only a few feet away from the scholars now, and another one was looking at us with similar confusion.

"My apologies," the first man said, "but why did you bring a servant here? You ought to know they are not allowed, save with a Sahelian. What is your name?"

Ah, the poor fucker. He'd handed her a line and not even known it. Akua met his eyes and smiled, that pretty little number she liked to pull out when she was about to ruin someone's day.

"Akua," she said, hand coming to rest on the neck of a scholar with her back to us, "Sahelian."

Fear flooded the man's face, even as the shade idly snapped the scholar's neck. Calmly, I snatched the paring knife and flicked my wrist after taking a heartbeat to aim – it went right into the man's eye, and he fell down twitching. Well, at least it'd spare him the embarrassment of admitting that Akua had technically been allowed to bring us here. Talk about awkward. One of the survivors squawked in terror, the other one tipping as he backed away from the table hastily, but we were already moving. Akua flowed over the table smoothly, dropping down on the one who'd tripped, while I claimed a silver inkwell and smashed it into the side of the squawker's head.

He tried to ward me off with raised hands, but a jab in the stomach had him dropping his guard and I finished the job with another blow on the temple. He was unconscious, not dead, so I went to get the paring knife and finished the man off with it while Akua strangled the last one. I allowed myself one breath of relief after it was done, only then turning to look at the platform above. There'd been no alarm raised while we killed the scholars, which was a good sign. As if prompted, Archer appeared

at the edge of the platform with a sword in hand – and going through a guard's stomach. The man slumped and tumbled over the railing, falling below with a dull metallic bang. I winced at the noise.

"Go hunting," I said. "We can't afford being caught too early."

I was not yelling, but she was Named: she'd be able to hear me anyway. She nodded, vanishing behind stacks.

"Can you hide the bodies?" I asked Akua.

"I suppose," she said, wrinkling her nose. "I've never had to dispose of my own kills before, dearest, much less someone else's."

I rolled my eye at her.

"I'm sure you'll manage somehow," I said.

"And people wonder why we build tiger pits," Akua muttered.

I hid my amusement, instead closing my eyes and finding my calm. I began murmuring prayer in Crepuscular, Night flowing freely through my veins. I could feel the attention of the Sisters, their eagerness and their hunger. Good.

Now it was time to rob this place blind.

## Chapter 9: Vault

*"Eighty-seven: the secret passage your nemesis will use to escape the fortress can be used to enter that same fortress. They never consider that, for some reason."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

I kept my arms open wide and my hands flat, as if I were holding open a bag, but all that lay in between my fingers was shadow.

Akua stood slightly ahead of me, dropping one book after another into the dark. Without a sound they disappeared into the hungry maws of my patronesses, the two of us clearing out row after row as quickly as we could. We'd gone for the restricted sections, the forbidden ones: there was no point in my taking books that'd be in every other great Praesi library. Those sections were all trapped and warded, but I was being guided by someone who knew those traps and wards intimately. We'd been at it less than half an hour, as Archer hunted for anyone we might have missed out in the stacks, but already I'd sent hundreds and hundreds of tomes into the embrace of Sve Noc. Akua almost reverently dropped into the dark what looked like the handwritten notes of someone called Olowe, emptying the last of the shelf, and we stopped.

I looked back at rows and rows of empty shelves behind us, what had once been a section on dimensional mechanics and the technicalities of making a Breach. Not a book left, same as we'd done with necromancy, curses, High Arcana conjuration, three sections on diabolism and a dozen more branches of sorcery. It would have been missing the point to say we'd taken a fortune in books, because what we'd stolen was essentially priceless. There was no replacing any of this for the Sahelians.

"That is the last of the sections I would consider essential," Akua noted. "Unless you want to acquire more common tomes, we are finished."

"That was it?" I asked, skeptical.

"My family has a personal library, naturally," she dismissed. "And the most dangerous volumes will be down in the hidden vaults. Yet for the library, I would consider nothing else here irreplaceable."

I supposed it would have been greedy to ask for a thousand priceless books instead of just a few hundred, I mused, not that it was stopping me. I folded my arms, left over right, and brought them to my chest as I slowly eased my grip on the Night and the darkness faded. The working hadn't been all that strenuous to maintain, but it had taken concentration: I was glad it was done.

"I'll take your word on it," I replied.

If we'd had more time I would have considered emptying the entire place just to make a point, but we didn't. I was, to be frank, surprised the Eyes hadn't betrayed us yet. My bet was on there being another game at play here, one I hadn't quite figured out yet. That tended to be a safe bet when the Intercessor was around. Regardless, we needed to get a move on if we wanted to clear out the artefact vaults as well before this all came down on our heads. We took the stairs down and I cursed every few steps the absence of my staff and the apparently deep and abiding hatred Praesi architects had for handrails. Seriously, would it kill whoever kept building these ridiculous places to throw up a few of those? Take out two of the fucking egg-sized rubies encrusted into one of the wall frescoes and you could pay for those to be done for the entire damned palace. Some of my thoughts came out as grumbling under my breath, I figured, since Akua looked highly amused and offered me her arm for the last few steps. I took it with ill-grace, looking away. I got cackled at for that immediately, Archer popping out from behind stacks with a grin.

"Aw, isn't that cute," Indrani grinned. "If we get to robbing the Tower, is it going to make you hold hands?"

She smelled faintly of blood, I noticed. I cocked an eyebrow at her and she threw me a sheathed short sword about my size.

"Lots of stragglers?" I asked, ignoring the jibe.

I drew the blade, testing the weight, and found it good enough. Not as good as something fitted for me, but it'd do. As I fitted the sheath at my belt, Indrani passed a blade at Akua who nodded thanks in return and got a smile for it.

"Five," Archer replied, "but one of them was a mage. I had to get tricky."

The edge of one of her sleeves was slightly singed, I found with closer study.

"Good work," I simply said. "We're hitting the hidden vaults now. You good to fight?"

"I was promised horrors, Foundling," Indrani grinned. "Hells, why do you think I'm even here?"

Ugh, I bet that pun was even intentional. I truly did have terrible taste in women.

"I'd assumed because you were dared while drunk," Akua drily replied.

"Hey," Indrani replied, offended. "That only works like, a third of a time."

I loudly coughed.

"Fine, maybe closer to half," Archer conceded.

Immediately after she turned to Akua with a scowl, jabbing a finger at her.

"And don't you dare cough too, Petty Poltergeist," she growled. "Half is all I'll go up to."

"I would never dare," Akua lied, smiling prettily.

It was in a better mood that the three of us moved out towards the back of the great library, where the returned once-heiress to Wolof told us that the easiest path into the hidden vaults lay. I'd expected some sort of archway full of damned souls or a corridor swarming with enchantment, but what our quick march there revealed was actually just a set of tall golden doors. Nicely sculpted, if a little heavy on the Wolof-and-particularly-the-Sahelians-are-the-best-look-at-all-these-fools-we-crushed slant. To my admitted bewilderment, Akua then simply grabbed one of the large iron rings on the doors and pulled one open. It revealed a short hallway of bare stone, leading to a steel grate.

"Wait, is that it?" Indrani asked.

She sounded a little cheated.

"That's got to be a trap, right?" I asked, cocking my head to the side.

"Oh, it is," Akua flatly agreed. "There is a secret entrance thirty feet to our left that would allow us to avoid the first two killing rooms, but it would require us to pass through the terror room – and without the proper protective amulets, that would be... unwise."

"Terror room, you say?" Archer idly repeated, sounding dangerous interested.

Of course she would be.

"Magical terror," Akua specified. "As close to the demonic emanation as my forebears could manage. Most people die of a stalling heart within the first ten heartbeats. No, the front path is best suited to our needs."

I considered the stone hall for a moment, humming.

"Floor trap?" I guessed.

"Hand me a book," Akua asked.

Snorting, I grabbed what looked like a primer on the classical elements – *could have used you a few years back, buddy*, I thought – and began to pass it to her before pausing and glancing at Archer.

"Don't tell Zeze," I said.

"I'd be counted as an accessory," Indrani solemnly replied.

The book went to Akua's hand as she rolled her eyes, tossing it carelessly into the hallway. I glimpsed iron spikes emerging from the walls before the golden door shut. Huh. Akua, looking somewhat aggravated, wrenched open the door again and I stood there to watch as the spiked walls slowly closed in on the middle of the room. Door probably couldn't be opened from the inside, I decided. We stood for a while longer, waiting. Sometimes the walls quickly lurched forward for an inch or two, but most of the time they just... slowly advanced.

"Now that's just *asking* for a hero to find a way out," I sadly said.

"The mechanisms that make the walls move are deep in the stone," Akua said, sounding a tad defensive. "They can't be changed without load-bearing walls being knocked down."



"How do we get through?" Indrani asked, more pragmatically.

The shade stepped into the hall fearlessly when the walls were near through, slipping around the edge of the right one and disappearing. A few heartbeats later there was a metallic wrenching sound, maybe a lever being pulled, and the walls stopped. They stayed extended, leaving a path maybe a foot wide between the iron spikes that led straight to the door in the back. *You could have at least pushed the door to the left so it'd be covered when the wall advanced, you hacks,* I silently thought. Akua slipped back around the edge of the wall, reappearing with a smile as she dusted herself off.

"And to cross that?" I asked, pointing at the steel grate.

"The Archer key," the shade gracefully replied.

The Archer in question snorted, stepping forward – Akua flowed around her – and pushing to the end of our little narrow passage. One, two, three, four. On the fourth Name-assisted kick the steel grate toppled down, ripped right off the hinges. I cocked an eyebrow at Akua.

"It is enchanted against blades and lockpicks, not mules," she shrugged.

"*I heard that,*" Indrani called out.

Swallowing a grin, I shimmied through and followed the shade over the fallen grate. It brought us to another stone hall, this one rather more ornate than the last. The walls were covered with mosaics in the Sahelians colours whose patterns felt... oddly fascinating – I wrenched away my eyes forcefully – and whose floor was checkered marble in black and white. At the end I saw an open stone doorway and what looked like curving stairs going down. The three of us were huddled in a small antechamber between the halls, and out of curiosity I looked up. Yeah, as I'd figured the stone archway here had small depression in the rocks.

"Stone door falls down here and over there," I mused. "I'm calling... pit trap?"

"Oh," Indrani gurgled. "That's an *old* one. Is it the black or white tiles that make it work?"

"There are triggers under both," Akua sighed. "And the floor itself is not trapped. Once the doors close, the mosaic shifts in some places and begins releasing alchemical gas."

"What's it do?" Archer asked,

"It was a forgetfulness mixture, when I left," Akua noted. "Prevented memory recall longer than five heartbeats. It could be anything now, of course."

"And we beat this how?" I asked.

It was too long for us to jump our way across, although maybe if I used Night...

"The stone doors open again once the monitoring enchantment senses that there is no longer gas in the air," she said. "I know where the openings are, so Catherine and I simply need to block them until the trap begins to reset. We'll have a window of four heartbeats to cross."

"That's very unsporting," I approved.

She pointed out where in the mosaics – near what looked like a swirl of pale eyes – we'd need to act and then we moved out. The doors immediately fell down from the ceiling, blocking the paths out, but what followed was almost absurdly mundane. I did not use Night or a Name trick, simply jamming my thumb into the opening and then waiting for a while as the doors began to rise again. We ran, Indrani snickering the whole time, and made it to the stairs before the trap activated again. We went down slowly, catching our breath, and I cast a consternated look behind us.

"I don't understand why your ancestors didn't just layer a hundred wards," I admitted. "This stuff can be beaten, a hundred different layers of protection changed every few years can't."

"We are in the Vaults, my darling," Akua replied. "It is presumed that anyone who made it this far into the Emyrean Palace has the help of traitors within our own. Wards can be crossed in the snap of a finger, with the right helper. This? This cannot."

I was about to object some more when she silenced me with a finger.

"These were the easiest of rooms, my heart," she said. "Now that we are below, tricks such as I used will find little bite."

Straight from the start we were faced with a crossroads, the paths going to the left and right. The left side, Akua explained, was where the other entrance above would have led to directly. The terror room.

"And where we're headed?" I asked.

The hallway here had mosaics much like those above, dangerous to look at for too long, which I figured was actually pretty clever on the part of the builders. You couldn't see the traps coming if you couldn't risk looking at your surroundings for long. Wouldn't

want to be one of the poor fuckers in charge of cleaning this place, though. Maybe they had wards in place to prevent it getting dusty?

"Straight into the illusion room and the duelling room, then we may access the first vault," Akua replied, leading us to another steel grate.

It required Archer's tender attentions once more, but when forced off the hinges it did not fall into the room beyond it. Anchored by enchantments, our guide noted, and so we 'opened' the broken thing as if we'd used a key. Beyond was a hall that was entirely mosaic, that confounding little number we'd been walking through. Here it covered the floor and ceiling too, though, and led to another steel grate. I risked small glimpses at the floor, finding pale eyes there like those that'd covered the gas exits above us, but I bit my lip. Something was wrong here, itching at me. I felt the presence of the Sisters fill me like cold water, Komana nudging my chin to look right instead of- the illusion broke and I let out a gasp.

"Fuck me," I murmured. "The spell here makes you twist left and right for up and down."

"Yes," Akua said, sounding pleased. "And so draw the eye away from this..."

She shimmied in front of me, dipping her foot into what my mind still insisted was the right wall, and the mosaic vanished. Under it was a sharp drop and even sharper steel spikes. Ah, lovely.

"There's a safe way through?" I asked.

"Indeed," Akua replied. "Archer?"

I turned to look at Indrani, who had her eyes closed and was muttering under her breath. She opened her eyes once, quickly glancing at the floor and then closing them again. Twice more she did that, looking angrier and angrier, until on the third she drew back her sleeve and bit her forearm hard enough blood came out. She looked again, eyes hard, and only then offered me a wild grin.

"It's fine, ladies," Archer said. "I can See it now. Mind couldn't get around trying to believe two things at the same time."

It was useful now and then to be reminded of how fucking dangerous Indrani actually was. Akua had been raised here and I had goddesses helping me see through this. Her? It was Name and grit that got her through. And somehow, now that she'd seen through the spell, I suspected that no other one like it would ever fool her again. We crossed the floor like children holding

hands in dark woods, moving across the complex back and forth pattern that Akua unerringly led us through until we'd reached the door on the other side. Solid copper, this one, and our guide opened it by ghosting a hand through the lock and picking it with her own 'fingers'. It popped open, revealing another short antechamber leading into another hall.

This one, which she'd called the duelling room earlier, was little more than bare stone and mosaic walls save for the five longswords that'd been sheathed in stands of copper. It was a thick steel door that awaited us at the end of the hall, with no visible lock or pull.

"So we draw a sword and fight an opponent for each one we draw?" Indrani guessed.

"Not at all," Akua laughed. "Pulling swords only makes parts of the floor fall away into spikes when the monster is unleashed. It is the touch of flesh on the door that begins the duel."

"And how does the door open?" I asked.

"An enchanted key, which we do not have," Akua said.

I glanced at the steel door in the back and Archer did the same.

"I'm not sure I can force my way through that with brute strength," she admitted.

"We will not need to," the shade said. "The swords are, naturally, all cursed."

"Naturally," I drily echoed.

"The second blade from the right should have a particularly nasty rotting curse on it that I believe will damage the door enough to reveal the lock, if pressed in the right place," Akua said. "I should be able to pick said lock from there."

"And you have no flesh to rot," I mused. "All right, that'll work. That leaves Indrani and I to handle whatever creature comes out. You have any notion of what it'll be?"

"It used to be giant scorpion, but it should have died by now," Akua noted. "It shouldn't be too difficult an opponent, given the breakdown of relations with Aksum. That is where all the most... difficult creatures tend to come from."

I nodded.

"Can we use the other blades against the beastie?" Indrani asked.

"Alas, it is always bespelled to be protected when put away here," Akua said.

It was typical of Praesi highborn, I thought, that though a great many of them were utterly and irremediably mad their madness somehow turned out to be in some ways sensible and organized. It was a thorough sort of lunacy, and all the more dangerous for the thoroughness being married to the absence of sense in most other ways. I unsheathed the blade at my hip, rolling my wrist to limber it and stretching my limbs carefully. Archer gave me an amused look but did the same, Akua patiently waiting for us to be done.

"Where's it going to come from?" I asked.

The shade simply pointed upwards. Of course it was, I sighed. I looked at Archer, who nodded in approval.

"Get us started, Akua," I said.

Smoothly she walked up the swords and pulled out her chosen one from the copper stand, darting away afterwards. There was no visible sign of the curse she'd mentioned on the sword, but I could smell the scent of power in the air. She'd not lied when she called the enchantment on that nasty. Three heartbeats passed before a floor panel of about nine feet by three shattered into neat pieces and revealed a spiked pit below even as the ceiling shifted above us. There were three birdlike screeches as a massive form – Gods, large as two oxen at least – dropped down from above between Indrani and I. Two thoughts came to me about at the same time. First off, Akua had been rather optimistic when she'd assumed that the giant scorpion had died of old age.

Second, *this was not a noise a scorpion should be able to make.*

"Why does this thing have faces on its back?" I asked.

"Better question," Archer mused, "why are they all screaming?"

I ducked away from a lightning-quick strike of a stinger the size of my head, the massive scorpion trying to trample Indrani as it kept me away. She slid under it, laughing in glee as something in its belly began spitting out acid that she only narrowly avoided, and I chopped away at one of its bony legs to distract it. Bony was the right term for it, I found out, the bloody carapace was hard as bone. And that was just the leg, the body would be worse. That left the eyes to strike at or, urgh, the... faces. Which were still screaming, looking like damned souls sown into chitin and singing out their eternal torment. Hells, they actually might be. It turned its attention to me as Archer put distance between her and the tail, pincers twitching. I kept close to the wall, throwing myself to the side at the last moment when it struck and smiling at the screeches of pain it let out when the pincer hit solid stone.

"I am working the lock," Akua calmly called out.

"Archer, let's not fight the damn thing," I screamed.

"Boo," Indrani screamed back.

Her shout drew back its attention and it stabbed away at her repeatedly with the stinger, growing angrier as she kept dodging at the last moment, and I darted close to its face to make sure it had to keep its attention divided. The pincers came at me from both sides, but the anglers were predictable. Anger was making it sloppy. It grew even angrier a moment later, when Indrani finally baited it into a stinger strike at the angle for her to cut off the entire thing after she dodged. Even as it screeched I took the opportunity to land a few hacks at its eyes, black fluid dripping everywhere, and retreated as it began to attack blindly.

"Around the spikes," I yelled at Indrani.

There was a narrow strip between the walls and the floor that'd dropped, and with the scorpion partly blinded now was the time to make us of it. I began to cross towards the latter half the hall, where Akua was kneeling before the door, and Archer did the same a moment later. With any luck the bloody thing would try to follow us and fall to its death. Halfway through I turned to have a glance and had a moment of triumph when I saw the monster was following us, but it was short-lived. The scorpion's legs unfolded further with a wet wrenching side, and hoisted him up by pushing against both walls. *Oh fuck me*, I thought as it began to walk on the walls to catch up to us.

"Akua," I screamed.

"I am nearly done," she replied.

The tail Archer had cut was leaking black blood everywhere, but it could still serve as a whip. As I discovered when it snapped after me, forcing me to hop forward on my bad leg and nearly fall to my death.

"Akua," I screamed.

"And done," she replied.

I heard the door open with a click and threw myself on solid ground, landing in a painful. Archer was already there and she helped me up, dragging me as we broke into a run towards the open door. The monster was behind us, pincers lashing out as it landed on the solid stone with a clattering sound, but Indrani threw me through the doorway and I heard her stumbled through as I flopped on my belly. Akua slammed closed the door, not quite quickly enough to silence the screeches of rage from the monstrous scorpion. All three of us dropped to the floor for a while after that, catching our breath.

"So the scorpion might still be alive," I solemnly told Akua.

There was a moment of silence, then all three of us began laughing in spasms. The merriment passed, but it'd done us some good. Even better was that we were now going to get into our first vault of the night. The room we opened did not look like the fabulous gold-and-gem-laden treasury my imagination had conjured up. Disappointingly enough, the large vault looked more like an orderly storage house than anything else. The goods were interesting, at least. A dozen enchanted swords and twice as many armours, a bow made of dragonbone – which Indrani pawed lustfully at – and several banners whose cloth was woven with spells that inspired either valour or fear. There was also a saddle made of what I suspected to be human skin, which I almost hesitated to take. Well, the Sisters probably wouldn't mind even if it was. It was minor artefacts aside from that, mostly enchanted jewelry and amulets.

"Prestige pieces," Akua told me. "All were crafted by famous practitioners. It is a traditional way to reward a subordinate without overly empowering them."

"Well," I shrugged, "into the Night they go."

It didn't take long to clear it all out, Archer reluctantly parting with the bow when it was pointed out to her that she did not have arrows to go with it.

"Left now," Akua said. "It will bring us to three adjoining vaults."

Huh, that did sound rather tempting.

"What's in the way?" I asked, and before she could answer I got my response.

It was, uh, remarkably straightforward.

"This is an acid pool," Archer said, looking down at, well, *that*.

"So it is," Akua cheerfully replied.

It was maybe three feet below the threshold we stood at, and there was no way to tell how deep it ran. The length of the hallway was at least thirty feet, which made it a laughable notion to try jumping.

"How do people usually get through it?" I asked.

"They bring a specially crafted silver bridge," Akua smiled.

"With a mage around you could make a bridge across out of shields," Indrani noted.

A heartbeat later, there was a little shiver across the room as a pulse of... something went through the air. I cocked an eyebrow at Akua.

"Raw magic," she said. "It would disrupt any ongoing spell formula. Anyone trying to cross on a shield panel would..."

She glanced meaningfully at the gently simmering acid. Lovely.

"I'm pretty sure Night won't be disrupted," I frowned.

"My ancestors did not, in fact, plan for the human herald of drow goddesses to infiltrate their vaults and then use a largely unheard of and poorly understood power to make a bridge across their acid pool," Akua confirmed, her tone holding the faintest note of sarcasm. "How short-sighted of them indeed."

I coughed in embarrassment, then got to work. The wards over the palace were still making it hard to call on Night even though we were well past nightfall, and I found the magic pulse harder to deal with than I'd thought it would be. Had to do double layers to avoid a thinning, which made it take longer than I would have liked. It was with sweat beading the back of my neck that I brought us to the other side, where Archer promptly kicked her way through the steel grid. How had the godsdamned acid pool been the trickiest of these so far? It was a good thing the wards hadn't been updated here in a while, I thought, because a few more layers of whatever made it hard to shape the Night might have managed to lock me out from using it in practice.

Akua stopped us before we could enter the traditional antechamber, dragging an ethereal foot over the floor. Headsman's blades came out from both sides, cutting into nothing but thin air, and they began to withdraw. Well, that'd been bracing. They'd been building up the impression that the antechambers were safe this whole time, hadn't they? Tricky fuckers. The hallway beyond was unlike any we'd seen before, which I did not take as a good sign. Every part of the walls, floor and ceiling was covered with angled mirrors, giving the impression that we were standing on the inside of a gem. The uncovered parts were the doors in and out, and somehow I suspected that was only a temporary state of affairs.

"Enchanted mirrors?" I asked.

"They induce nightmare-filled sleep if stared at," Akua said, "but it is the doors to watch out for. They will shoot out burning rays of light, which then..."

"Reflect every which way," Indrani finished, sounding a little impressed.



"The enchantments in the mirrors amplify the heat," Akua said. "There is an upper limit, of course, but after seven reflections it would be enough to incinerate an ogre on contact."

Given the kind of people these defences belonged to, I suspected it was not a figure of speech she'd used there.

"Night's not great against fire," I admitted. "So that's a problem. How do we get through the door on the other end?"

It was a copper one and Akua had picked one of those earlier but I didn't want to assume.

"I can get us through the lock there," she said. "But not before at least a dozen spells have been shot out."

"These rays, do they reflect off anything or just the mirrors?" Archer suddenly asked.

I breathed out in understanding and so did our guide.

"The side of a sword should work," she replied.

Indrani shot me a smile, which I forced myself to return. I was getting closer to my Name, but the reflexes weren't quite there yet. I began to draw Night into myself, murmuring prayers in Crepuscular. At the very least quickening my limbs ought to help. Our swords were bared a moment later and as I grimaced we darted forward. Before we'd even made it a foot forward mirrors moved to cover the entrance we'd left and three spells shot out from the polished copper door. Whooping with glee, Indrani casually batted one away while Akua and I instead prudently moved to the sides. She went straight for the door, even as it began spewing out a second volley, and I took up a position guarding her back.

I narrowly caught a ray that would have hit my chest, reflecting it upwards and then into a wildly careening trajectory. The trouble with all those fucking angled mirrors was that it was hard to guess what path the spell would take when it came back. Archer was still in the middle of the room, moving with a dancer's grace as she reflected spells in what was too measured a way for it to be random. Eyes narrowed I tried to follow what she was doing, but only figured it out after the third volley of spells came out and two of the rays hit each other in midair, bursting into a ball of flame and smoke. Fucking Hells, was she actually making them hit each other? I could barely keep up with the ones actually coming for me.

That moment of inattention cost me, even my quickened limbs not quite quick enough when a ray I avoided was reflected right back into my shoulder from behind before I could blink. I managed to get it to clip the shoulder instead of bite into the muscle, at least, but I swallowed a scream as a parchment's depth of my

shoulder just turned to ash and the livery over it vanished. *Fuck*, that hurt. Akua came through for us moments later, the copper door opening, and I was quick to retreat behind it. Archer took her time joining us, twice more slapping away spells before slipping behind the door as I slammed it closed. Her eyes dipped to my shoulder, but like Akua she said nothing. I called on Night to kill the pain and we moved on to the vaults awaiting us.

The first vault looked very mundane, until you had a closer look. The neat piles of wood were all atrociously expensive sorts from the Waning Woods or beyond, the blocks of rock and the gems all gave off the scent of magic without being enchanted – which meant inherent sorcery – and the sealed copper boxes here were all filled with living plants I did not recognize. There was a single potion rack, with maybe sixty vials in whole, but my jaw dropped when I saw a whole half-dozen of them were as red and faintly glowing water.

“Are those actual healing potions?” I croaked.

“They are,” Akua said. “And not even the most precious of the lot. The bottom row is the elixir of long life. Drinking it adds at the very least forty years to one’s lifespan.”

I’d keep one of those for Vivienne, then. I shook my head, still in shock that I was looking at the little red potions that were said to be the closest thing to a panacea that alchemists had ever achieved. They were also said to require the blood of a dragon taken while it still lived to be brewed, which had seen them placed squarely in the realm of legends. The last Callowan ruler said to have drunk one was *Elizabeth Alban*. It was with petty glee that I cleared out the room into the Night, being careful not to break anything. We wasted no time hitting the second vault, which was significantly less worth smiling about.

Rooms full of demons tended to get that reaction out of me.

I saw the same three Weeping Snares the High Lord of Wolof had stood me off with and promptly stashed them away, to the reluctant acceptance of the Sisters, but they had significantly less qualms taking in the rows and rows of grimoires that Akua told me were contracts with devils. Two silver jigsaw puzzles that supposedly could give a glimpse into how to make a Great Breach when completed went into the Night as well, as well as a dozen more of what Akua called ‘insight’ artefacts, but when we came to a simple copper crown on a pedestal the Crows sent me a wave of wariness.

“Insipientia,” Akua reverently said.

My Old Miezán was rusty, but not *that* rusty.

"It's a bound demon of Madness," I said. "The same one your mother unleashed?"

"Yes," she replied. "My family has held other demons, over the years, but never was there a binding quite so thorough or a demon quite so mastered as Insipientia has been. Centuries of foes have tried to free and turn it against us, ever to no avail."

I reached out for it, but the Crows balked. There was something about the crown that spooked them, and I wasn't one to gainsay the instincts of my patronesses when it came to demonic taint.

"It stays," I said. "Vault's clear, what's in the third one?"

"Nothing, presumably," Akua shrugged. "It is almost never used. It is the guest vault, and my family has rarely granted the honour of its use to anyone."

"Hey, worth a look anyway," Indrani drawled. "Maybe there'll be loose change there we can toss into the Night."

I rolled my eye but did not disagree. I wanted to be as thorough as possible when clearing the vaults. Akua informed us there were only two more left after this, and the paths began to grow complicated- we'd have to double back over the acid pool – when we forced open the warded door, revealing a sight that gave pause to all of us. In the bare stone room there was an altar and a sleeping body on it, but that wasn't the part that gave us pause. It was the fact that we were looking at a perfect reproduction of Akua Sahelian when she'd died. A shift modestly covered the body, but I'd seen enough of Akua over the years to know that this was looking at a twin. One that was *breathing*. The shade, face unreadable, took a few hesitant steps and laid a hand on the body. After a moment she gasped.

"What is it?" I quietly asked.

"She has magic," Akua said. "No mind or memories that I can feel, but the Gift is there."

Ah, I thought, and the pieces fell into place. The guest vault, huh. So this was the work of the sole person in Praes who might feasibly make this request of Sargon: Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name. There'd never been any need for me to lay out bait, I now understood. Malicia had always intended to take it. She was in need of a Warlock and of someone who had a good handle of me and my plans, so she intended to secure both in a single stroke. And there was the deeper game here, the one I was beginning to glimpse. The Intercessor, who had outed us in the fortress but not gotten us captured. The Bard had made sure that Sargon would cover the treasury and the granaries, figuring out one step of me that it would leave me only one place to go.

That the Intercessor too had wanted Akua to be in this room, at this moment, sent a shiver of dread up my spine. Did she know something I did not? Had I made a mistake? Or did I, for once, better understand the nature of the woman we were dealing with than either my opponents? My fingers clenched, then unclenched. None of us would know the answer to that until the very last moment, I suspected. Besides, now that we had seen what we were meant to the Eyes – the dull throb of magic filled the air, a ward being tripped. *There you go*, I thought, as troubles as I was vindicated. And still I couldn't shake the impression that I was missing something. That I was still underestimating my opponents somehow.

"We need to get out," I said. "They know we're here."

"Fuck," Indrani cursed. "Think we should grab the..."

She hesitated. I glanced at Akua.

"No," she decisively said. "It will be a trap of some sort."

I nodded.

"We're still using the way out in the Emyrean Hall," I said. "Can you lead us there quick?"

"Very much so," Akua replied. "There is a hall that leads there directly."

I didn't bother closing the door behind us as we filed out. We took a left at the end of the hall where the vaults were, which brought us to another large hallway where aside from the mosaics the sole decoration was a tomb of stone.

"That doesn't look good," Archer muttered.

"There is no need to worry," Akua snorted. "For this, I will require neither of you."

Taking her at her word we followed her in, and predictably enough the tomb's lid began to open. A strikingly good-looking man in bronze armour began to rise out, smiling eagerly, but the shade met his eyes and straightened her back.

"I am Akua Sahelian," she said.

The man froze. His eyes were blank, I noticed only then. And I had yet to see him breathe. Undead of some sort? I glimpsed a slender sword in the tomb with him, already half-drawn.

"No," the man hissed in Mthethwa. "Not after-"

"I am of the blood of Subira," Akua said, tone flat. "By the ancient compact, I bid you to return to your sleep and grant us passage."

"Insolent child," the man bit out, "how dare you-"

And yet, for all his complaining, his limbs were moving. He lay back down into the tomb, and even as he cursed Akua profusely he closed the lid over himself. There was a moment of silence, then Archer cleared her throat.

"So, uh, what was that exactly?"

"Dread Emperor Revenant was not the first Soninke to attempt to rule forever," Akua replied with a smile. "Merely the most successful. And some of my ancestors had an... interesting sense of humour."

Well, didn't that sound ominous. Still, I counted our blessings and followed our guide as we left. The door wasn't even locked from outside, meant to keep people out instead of in, and we hurried through only occasionally trapped sets of stairs until we emerged above in what looked like a large marble hallway. Above us I caught sight of something staggeringly beautiful: the night sky in all its glory. It wasn't like the lesser version of the Vaults, this was the real one – the very wonder this palace was named after. I could almost feel the wind looking at the ceiling here, see the clouds move and even the occasional bird fly. It was one of the most magnificent works of magic I'd ever seen.

"We are close to the passage," Akua said, breaking me out of my thoughts. "Let us hurry."

Yet even with her navigating for us, this part of the palace had been on high alert. It was mere moments before we came across a servant, who screamed out in alarm at the sight of our swords, and soldiers were on our heels in moments. Arrows and spells streaked behind us as we ran, clattering against tall marble columns and setting tapestries aflame. How many were there? At least sixty, I thought. Archer took an arrow in the arm but she ripped it away without batting an eye, cursing as she did, and twice streaks of flame went through Akua. She came back... weaker each time she reformed afterwards. Tired in away I'd never before seen her be as a shade.

We remained narrowly ahead of our opponents, until we reached the statue of Subira Sahelian that was the mark of one of the eleven secret passages into Wolof. Akua pushed the crown the man held in his hand and the statue began to move, revealing a narrow set of stairs, and we wasted no time heading down. The soldiers were close. The statue moved back behind us, though, which ought to slow them down some. The oppressive weight of a new set of wards washed over me the moment I got onto the stairs but I grit my

teeth and quickened my pace. We'd planned to leave through here from the start, though initially it would have been after we robbed the treasury instead of the vaults. See, like all of the eleven secret passages into Wolof this one was a trap.

The narrow stairs flared out into a larger platform where we all paused, and hastily I took out our last two water breathing potions. Indrani idly took two steps down the platform as I did, to trigger what we all knew was coming: moments after her foot touched the lower stairs water began pouring from the ceiling. It was a flood corridor, see. Either the pressure of the flood or drowning would take care of anyone who came through here. Except, of course, if they had prepared potions for this very eventuality. It'd never been an option to come back by the aqueduct again: we would have needed to swim uphill and against the current, and break through the enchanted barriers there again without the evanescent powder to do the work for us.

"Bottoms up," Indrani said as I gave her a vial.

We toasted and knocked down the drinks. I breathed in, limbering my shoulders for the coming swim. Sooner or later the guards would come down the stairs and try to snatch us with spells even if proper pursuit was impossible, we needed to get a head start. We waited a few heartbeats. And then, hideously, nothing happened at all. The potion did nothing.

"Cat," Indrani slowly said, but I did not answer.

Instead I closed my eyes. And there it was, the missing piece. Malicia had wanted Akua to see that body down in the Vaults, it was why the Eyes – who had no doubt reported to her body in the city the moment they'd been sure I could no longer kill them for it – had waited so long to pull the alarm. But it'd not made sense to me that she would then simply... let us go. Much as I despised the empress, she was one of the cleverest people I'd ever met. Malicia had been fine letting us go, I now realized, because she'd known we weren't going anywhere. The return vials of water breathing potion had been sabotaged before we ever left.

Had she gotten to the Concocter? No, I thought, she shouldn't have the leverage for that. Mostly likely just spies that'd had access to the vials at someone point before they got to my hands. A few foreign reagents would have been enough to fuck up a brew this complicated. And it didn't matter how it'd been done, I forced myself to acknowledge, just that it had. *The Intercessor knew from the start*, I put together as my stomach dropped. *It was Malicia's plan, and Malicia is Named*. So the old monster had just come in at the right time and the right place to nudge us so her favoured outcome came about. My fingers clenched.

Figuring out my enemies was useful, but what I needed right now was a way out.

"Akua," I said. "When we came out the reservoirs, you dried us. Do you think you could keep a bubble of air around our heads as we swim?"

There was a long moment of silence, then she shook her head.

"I do not think I am strong enough for two," the shade admitted. "Not after the spells I was struck by, and perhaps not even at my best. Around one of you, if I meld closely, and even then it will be difficult."

So Akua and one of us could still make it out. Not quickly, though, I thought. Which meant the person staying behind would have to keep the soldiers off their back for a while. Could I work around this with Night, steal air to bring with me? I murmured a prayer, reaching for the power, but though I felt the Crows reach out to me our fingers... missed. The wards were too heavy here, I realized. Night wouldn't get me out of this.

"You can't use Night, can you?" Indrani said, eyes sharp.

I shook my head.

"That settles it," Archer said. "It's got to be me. Your Name's not there yet. I'll keep them off long enough and you can trade back for me later."

I breathed out, looking for calm. Forcing it.

"Yeah," I said.

She slowly nodded, then turned to ask Akua something, and without missing a beat I struck the side of her head. She was quick, and strong, but I was both too and she'd not been expecting it. I caught her in my arms before she could collapse, golden eyes following me all the while.

"They can't kill me," I said. "Malicia knows she'd be risking handing the Dead King a victory if she did."

There was simply no one else that could keep the Firstborn bound to the Grand Alliance and Callow in the war the way I could. Vivienne could maybe talk our soldiers around, but the drow? No, Malicia wasn't after my life here. She wanted me in her grasp.

I intended to make her rue that notion to her dying day.

Above us the statue began moving, and I handed Archer to Akua. The shade took our friend, coming so close to me for a moment it would have been the easiest thing in the world to steal a kiss from my lips, but she refrained. Shouts from above. There was no more time, and if I was going to make it out of captivity I needed... something. A plan, a workaround. And it came to me, in a

flash, as above the first arrow was fired loosely in our direction.

"Takisha Muraqib," I hissed. "Make the offer for it. And the rest Sepulchral."

Her hand touched mine, impossibly warm, and she nodded.

"I will," Akua Sahelian swore.

Moments later she was in the water, bringing Archer with her, as spells began to light up the hall and I turned towards the enemy. Well, Night or not I had a sword and a long history of stabbing people with those.

Time to see how long I could buy them.

## Chapter 10: Parley

*"Diplomacy is as sailing, catching the way the wind blows."*

– Ashuran saying

There was something deeply disorienting about waking up after having been knocked out. It wasn't like falling asleep, there was this sense of... confusion, when where you were didn't match what you last recalled. So when my eyes opened, I made myself breathe in and out slowly as I forced myself to be calm. I did not know this bed, or these sheets – silk – or this room around me, lit with magelights and open windows giving a beautiful view of Wolof spread out below.

I rose from the cushions I'd been leaning on, soft and plump and exquisitely embroidered, and to my surprise my limbs did not pain me. I could feel my left arm was tender, the skin pulled taut in that way it was after mage healing was used on flesh, but even the ever-present dull ache in my bad leg had been made quiet. My clothes were not the ones I had last worn, loose yellow cotton trousers and a matching robe patterned in green, but they were a comfortable fit. I padded onto the stone floor barefoot, finding that a beautifully carved cane of red mahogany awaited my hand. I tried it out and it fit perfectly, the spread wings of the ravens sculpted on the handle comfortably matching my grip. Leaning on the cane, I cast a more elaborate look around.

It was a square room, and though the floor beneath my feet was covered in tiles and my surroundings were panelled in wood I caught it was all stone beneath it. Ignoring the slippers – was that *lion's fur*? – that'd been laid out for me, I ignored the rich furnishings of what was no doubt an elaborate prison cell and limped my way to the windows. Three large glass panels, open



just slightly but enough that I could feel the faintest breeze coming through. I flicked fingers at them and was not surprised in the least when the illusion flickered and a flat panel of bronze covered by a book's worth of runes was revealed for a heartbeat. The illusion resumed the moment my fingers ceased contact with the bronze, returning the false but beautiful view of Wolof under afternoon's light.

I reached for the Night knowing what awaited, and I'd been right: I could not quite grasp it, layers and layers of wards preventing me from drawing it close. The Sisters reached out towards me as well, and though our metaphysical fingers failed to connect their presence was a manner of comfort.

"Is my mind intact?" I asked them in a murmur.

Andronike sent a sense of reassurance, and from Komena I felt only cold anger at the thought that mere mortals might have tried to meddle with their First Under the Night. I let out a soft breath of relief. My thoughts and memories were still my own, then. I remembered fighting in that secret passage, keeping close to the wall to prevent the mages from getting a clean shot at me, but after the first few lives I'd taken it was... something of a blur. I'd been knocked unconscious at some point, presumably, and brought here. I drummed fingers against my cane, letting out a small hum. Had I held long enough for Akua and Indrani to escape? Yes, I decided after a moment. I should have gotten them enough of a head start if the guards had needed to dig me out with swords.

The goddesses in me withdrew, as if coming close had been an effort, and I offered the illusion of Wolof a wan smile. I'd not planned for this little venture to end in my being a prisoner, but I could deal with the change of plans. If Akua had grasped what I'd meant with those few words, near the end, then my sappers were already digging at the foundation of my captivity. Why, I just needed to bet it all on the strength of the understanding of myself between a woman I hated as much as I loved – and who would, before the moon's turn, betray me sure as the coming of the Last Dusk. Until then, though? My gaze swept the room again. My captivity came with a small rack of wine bottles at least, I found, not to mention bowls of assorted nuts and fruits.

I found a pair of books, too, atop a pretty cabinet. One was a book by a Mistress Adad titled 'Great Works', which a quick thumbing revealed was about ancient Soninke architecture. The other, to my reluctant amusement, was a Praesi highborn etiquette guide. Fair. Following the teaching of my Callowan forbears, I picked the book about architecture out of contrary spirit and limped to the table. Huh, was that a fully-stocked writing desk too? Nice. I picked up a bottle of wine on my way, refusing to

take one of the gold-rimmed crystal glasses by principle, and wrenched open a bottle of what looked like a Nok red before dropping into a seat and cracking open the book.

It ought to tide me over before Sargon came to talk, I figured.

—

The time of the day displayed by the illusion did not match what my sixth sense told me of the passage of time. It would have been a clever trick to disorient me, otherwise. Before I saw either hide or hair of High Lord Sargon or Malicia — who would be coming sooner or later, I knew — I first encountered servants. Veiled and silent they came thrice a day to bring out delicious four-course meals, fill my wine rack, empty the enchanted water cabinet in the corner. Heated water for washing was in the morning, after breakfast, and not once did any of them even twitch at anything I said. I even shouted at the top of my lungs once, to see if I'd at least get a reaction, but nothing. They might have been deaf, I thought, or at least bespelled for deafness.

I found had little to do but eat, read and drink for a whole day. Though I got restless before the first bell had passed, in a way this was also... relaxing. There was only so much I could do from in here, and how long had it been since I'd had so few demands on my time? Still, I wouldn't simply resign myself to it either. I inspected my cell but found no opening to it save for the hidden door the servants used, which led to a stone passage I only ever saw lead to a closed steel gate. I wasn't going to be popping that open with a cane, I knew, though it might be worth checking if I could touch Night while in the passage. Somehow I doubted it, but why leave the question unasked?

On the second day of my captivity, before I could find a good opportunity to try the passage, a servant in Sahelian livery came. No veil on this one, and unlike the others he was feeling chatty.

"This one bears the words of High Lord Sargon Sahelian, Queen of Callow," the man said.

"I'm listening," I replied, cocking an eyebrow.

Sargon was asking whether I'd agree to have my midday meal with him, as it turned out. I was tempted to decline just to see what would happen, but I held back. I wasn't sure if he'd left me to stew in the room for a day just to make sure I'd be inclined to talk, but if so I had to admit it'd worked. I took him up on the offer and was promptly afforded the services of a tailor, which I bemusedly agreed to. The clothes I'd been provided were comfortable enough, tunics in green or yellow with a Callowan cut, but I wouldn't turn down free clothes. Deciding to indulge a

whim I ended up wearing a soft yellow sundress, paired with a short frock in pale green and comfortable shoes. Alas, Sargon was warned well in advance so I did not get to see a look of surprise on his face but the momentary blankness was enough to have smiling as he sat across the table in my cell. He was not so ornately dressed as when we'd last met either, his white and red tunic rich and well-cut but otherwise unremarkable.

He was dressed in that way that those whose family had been rich for generations got dressed, when there was no longer a need to trumpet about the wealth.

"We will be having fey fowl as the main plate," the High Lord of Wolof amiably told me. "One was caught last month a few miles to the south."

"I'm going to assume we're not eating an actual fae," I replied, cocking an eyebrow.

He chuckled.

"We are not. The birds are descended from experiments of Dread Emperor Sorcerous' that his successor loosed into the wilds," Sargon said. "It is said he was attempting to infuse birds with the powers of Arcadia, but only ever succeeded with the basest of their kind. The first specimens were highly toxic, but not so their progeniture."

"Huh," I said. "They taste any good?"

"Delicious when braised and served with zaze sauce," Sargon smiled. "I don't believe you've ever had it before."

The man kept a damn good table, I'd give him that much. The first two plates were warm herbal bread served with sauces and a spicy but refreshing broth, followed by the fowl-on-rice with the zaze sauce that proved exactly as good as he'd boasted it would be. It ended with a creamy, sweet pastry that tasted of eggs and cinnamon I found paired well with my wine. And none of it was poisoned, an additional point in its favour. The conversation had been enjoyable but light, the two of us pretending I wasn't a prisoner in Wolof and discussing what I'd read in 'Great Works' – I suspected his enthusiasm there was not feigned in the slightest – and a few anecdotes about the city itself. All of it very tame.

When a servant brought me a pipe stuffed with wakeleaf and refilled my wine, though, I knew the real conversation was about to start. Sargon gallantly struck the match for me and lit it, himself indulging instead in a small cup of an amber liquor that smelled strongly of peaches.

"This morning I threatened to have you executed should your army not retreat," Sargon conversationally said, "but your marshal declined rather rudely."

"Juniper knows an empty bluff when she hears one," I shrugged, pulling at my pipe.

Praes couldn't afford to kill me right now. Much like I was pulling my punches fighting them, as I wanted the Empire's martial strength mustered against Keter, they too had to pull theirs. If Malicia killed me, there was a very real risk that the western fronts would outright collapse – and much as she liked to pretend otherwise, the empress didn't actually want the Dead King to want any more than we did.

"Sadly," Sargon sighed.

I breathed in deep of my wakeleaf as he sipped at his drink.

"I have been advised to torture you publicly in order to force compliance, naturally," he conversationally added.

I blew out a small ring of smoke, shaping it by making my lips pop. I did not answer. He chuckled, revealing that slightly crooked smile again.

"I know better than to attempt such a thing, of course," High Lord Sargon said, "though you do not seem worried in the slightest."

"I had my soul eviscerated by lesser gods once," I idly replied. "Came out of it mostly sane. Not a lot of torture than can beat that, even if you get inventive."

And neither Juniper nor Vivienne would fold at the sight anyway. They both knew I'd tan their hides if they did. All it'd win Sargon was my genuine enmity, which he was taking pains to avoid earning.

"I would not dare claim that I can imagine," the golden-eyed man amiably replied. "You will understand, naturally, that holding the head of a host besieging my holdings prisoner is something of complicated situation."

Meaning some of his people wanted me dead or at least with fewer things, and that refusing them while my army was camped outside the gates did him no favours. Amusingly enough, it could be argued that in several ways his position had been *worsened* by capturing me.

"Must be frustrating, having Malicia dictate to you in a way that goes against your interests," I said.

He thinly smiled.

"Not executing you is in my interests as well, Your Majesty," Sargon replied. "Greater implications as to the fate of Calernia aside, should I murder the most distinguished Queen of Callow in two centuries I will have heroes coming for my head every spring until I die."

He sipped at his liquor, sighing.

"I expect several of my more short-sighted cousins are pushing for your execution in the very hope that the Woe will murder me in turn," he admitted. "Yet I would argue that my greater frustration in all this affair is that I would much prefer to be at peace with you, Queen Catherine."

"That's easy enough," I frankly replied. "Turn on Malicia. You're only in my way so long as you're one of the pillars propping her reign up."

The dark-skinned man laughed, the merriment of it lighting up his eyes. Akua's cousin, yet so little like her. Even at her most carefree she held something of herself back but Sargon Sahelian was... less restrained. He allowed himself to feel more genuinely, I decided. Would she had been like that too, if she'd not been raised to be the monster of monsters among this most terrible of families?

"I will be honest with you, Queen Catherine," Sargon grinned, "as every report my spies have brought me insist that it is the approach you best respond to."

The worst part of it, I thought, was that even knowing what he was doing I still found my lips twitching. Sargon Sahelian might be a monster, but he was a *charming* one.

"I find it saves times," I shrugged. "By all means, my lord of Wolof, lay it on me."

"I am not a good man, Queen Catherine," Sargon indifferently shrugged. "So long as my city is left to me, so long as my domain is unmolested? I do not much *care* what happens to Praes, or even Calernia at large."

Much as I would have liked to damn him for petty apathy while the world was falling apart a mere two nations west, I held my tongue. How much worse was he than Proceran princelings, in truth, or even the squabbling League of Free Cities? I doubted he was any better than them either, but I would not pretend that the careless disregard on display here was some unrivalled pit of evil.

"My support of Dread Empress Malicia rests on two pillars," Sargon continued. "The first is that, for all her flaws, she

remains the individual in Praes best able to deliver a resumption of order."

She was at least half the reason order needed resuming in the first place, as far as I was concerned, but that was why he'd begun this by making his indifference clear. What did Sargon care that much of this was on Malicia's hands, if she were still the woman best placed to ensure it wouldn't spill over anywhere that mattered to him? I puffed at my pipe, blowing out a stream of smoke to the side.

"And the second is that she has your soul in a box," I finished.

"Indeed," he politely agreed. "I am loyal to her in the sense that a noble of the Wasteland is loyal to anything or anyone – that is, only so long as the balance of consequence and convenience is not greatly moved in disfavour of continued loyalty."

The unspoken part was that an army outside his gates, on top of the messes that my presence kept heaping on his lap, was pushing on that balance noticeably.

"Which leaves one important question before this conversation proceeds," Sargon Sahelian said. "Can your patronesses free my soul, Black Queen?"

I'd known that was coming. It was an obvious bribe to approach him with, a good way to flip a High Lord against the Tower without much military power needing to be exerted. Which had been why I'd first asked Sve Noc as much months ago. It'd not been a coincidence that I'd not made the offer.

"Not from here," I said, "and not without a price."

The Crows were sure his soul was being held in the Tower, and they weren't going anywhere near that place if they could help it. I honestly wasn't sure even a Choir would be able to bring the seat of Praesi power down – it'd taken the armies of two thirds of Calernia and entire *battalions* of heroes to get it done, last time.

"Unfortunate," the High Lord of Wolof murmured. "It would have simplified this all a great deal. I am, alas, not eager to trade a single mortal mistress for a pair of immortal ones."

"You'd find the payment much more agreeable than expected, I'm sure," I easily replied. "But that is your right. We will speak again should an opportunity arise."

"Of course," Sargon said, inclining his head. "And so while we remain so refreshingly bound to honesty, I am compelled to ask-"

He leaned slightly forward, drink in hand.

"- what is it that you *want*, exactly?"

I snorted.

"There's a broad question," I said. "Right now? Vale summer wine. Or maybe the journal of the warlock your ancestors placed at the side Theodosius the Unconquered."

"I can have the latter brought easily enough," Sargon waved away. "And as you no doubt grasped, I mean to ask what is it that this entire Wasteland campaign of yours is trying to achieve. You've not the strength or inclination to occupy Praes, that much is plain, so what is it you *do* want?"

I set down my pipe, amused at the boldness, and smiled at him over the rim of my glass before taking a sip.

"Arguably, as one of Malicia's backers you're one of the last people I should tell," I pointed out.

"On the contrary," Sargon said, shaking his head. "Unless you intend to purge the empress' supporters among the nobility, I am one of the individuals you most need to convince. Even if you kill the woman in question, Queen Catherine, what she *represents* does not disappear."

"And what does Malicia represent, exactly?" I asked.

"A strong Tower with no taste for foreign adventures. Power being concentrated in Ater through the Imperial Court and the bureaucracy," Sargon replied without hesitation. "It comes at the price of curtailing many of the old privileges and ennobling greenskins, but many still consider it an acceptable trade."

"Nok was sacked," I flatly said. "Thalassina is dust. Foramen is held by High Lady Whither, the Grey Eyries outright seceded, the Steppes are in civil war and two of the High Seats are openly backing another Dread Empress. Half the army that's supposed to serve her *deserted*. You call this a strong Tower?"

"The Dread Empire of Praes turned back the Tenth Crusade with Thalassina as its sole permanent loss," Sargon countered.

"Foramen was brought back into the fold bloodlessly. Sepulchral's rebellion has stalled and the only reason it ever gained grounds was that the Carrion Lord's attempted coup – which failed, half the Legions staying loyal to the Tower even after decades of other loyalties being cultivated among their officers."

My eye narrowed. They were blaming the messes on Black. *Of course they would*, I thought. *He's Duni, the nobles despise him and they're not wrong about him having added to the chaos in the*

*first place*. I wondered how much of this was decades of hatred between my father and the aristocrats given voice and how much of it was opinions Malicia had seeded herself. It would hardly be the first time she blamed the unpopular parts of her reign on Black and the tactic tended to be a successful one.

"As for the Clans, Queen Catherine," he continued, "that they would war on each other is only to be expected when some among them were raised above others. Strong Lords of the Steppes will emerge from the violence, able to ably discharge the duties that were passed onto them."

I hummed. There was no point in arguing this with him. I wasn't even sure he believed in the first place, anyway.

"Let's say I buy that, for the sake of argument," I shrugged. "She still needs to go. She's been an aggressive ally to the Dead King while the rest of Calernia has been fighting for survival. She fucked us in the League and in Procer, and even before she antagonized *every single other ruler* on the continent the grab she made for the doomsday fortress that was made of Liesse made it clear she can't be trusted to remain in power. Nobody wants the Tower with a weapon that makes Hellgates, Sargon. *Nobody*."

"Considering all the nations so antagonized have been at war with the Empire for years," he drily said, "one might argue she was in fact rather rest-"

"You're being obtuse," I flatly interrupted. "Even if there weren't a hundred reasons to put her head on a pike, and you know there are, at the end of the day she had to die because we can't allow the *precedent*. If the Grand Alliance doesn't cut her head off then we're telling the world that we can be backstabbed while fighting existential threats without there being consequences. And there's not a single signatory that's willing to swallow that, Sargon."

"This is a compelling argument," Sargon Sahelian mildly said, "largely for people who are not Praesi."

I sipped at my wine to hide my expression. That was a decent point, actually. We didn't actually have a lot to offer people who weren't already rebelling against Malicia. The truth was that the people currently backing her reign *would* lose out when she got deposed. They wouldn't gain from what I wanted to achieve here in Praes. One the other hand, the fact that those same people couldn't give less of a shit that Malicia's plots abroad had caused thousands of deaths and risked the annihilation of Calernia didn't particularly endear them to me. They didn't get to pretend they were being unfairly victimized after turning a blind eye to that. If you threw stones at bears for long enough, you got mauled.



There was no deep lesson behind that except that you shouldn't fucking throw stones at bears.

"We're a few knives in the back past lectures from your side, Sargon," I flatly replied.

"Praes would be a silent place, if that were the case," the High Lord laughed. "Though you have me curious now, I'll admit. Who is it that you mean to replace Her Most Dreadful Majesty?"

I cocked an eyebrow.

"The Carrion Lord?" Sargon tried. "He is disappeared, if not dead. And Sepulchral is unlikely to remain a steady ally to your Grand Alliance for long, for all that she now courts your friendship."

Abreha Mirembe being a snake was hardly news to me, but the first half of that was rather amusing.

"It never ceases to fascinate me," I said, "how large of a blind spot you highborn have when it comes to Amadeus of the Green Stretch. It's like we're talking about different men."

"Half the High Seats would rebel at the mere idea of Duni ruling over them," Sargon said, eyes narrowed as he studied me. "Yet you know this, I think. And so I wonder if you do not play a longer game than any of us had considered."

I leaned back into my seat.

"Oh?" I said. "What game would that be?"

The dark-skinned man raised his glass, the last wisps of amber liquor swirling.

"Mile thaman, Sahelian," the High Lord of Wolof toasted.

I smiled and spoke not a word. If he wanted to believe I had come east to raise Akua Sahelian as empress, let him. He drained the cup.

"It would be an interesting time to live in, if you got your way," Sargon admitted. "It is almost a shame you will not."

"I've heard that before," I said.

He looked faintly amused.

"I've a great deal of respect for your abilities, Queen Catherine, but this once luck was not on your side," the golden-eyed man said. "There is little you can do from captivity."

I met his eyes with mine, baring my teeth in a malicious smile.

"Before the week's end," I said, "I am going to walk out of the front gates of Wolof with everything I want. And the both of you are going to let me."

So ended my first meal with Sargon Sahelian.

—

He sent the journal, as he'd said it would. Made for interesting reading, with a surprising amount of steamy bits between the battles and commentaries. Kojo Sahelian had gotten around and not been shy in writing about it. I sat and read and waited, knowing this was only beginning.

—

When Malicia came she did not bother with charm.

She knew better than to believe relations between us could be mended, I supposed. It was the following morning, shortly after breakfast, that she was announced by a servant in livery. I didn't bother to study the last meat puppet she'd decided to wear in any great detail — what would be the point? She wore a woman's form, Soninke and tall, and besides that I did not bother to take her in. I stayed standing as she stepped in, cane in hand as I leaned against the wall. The illusion of Wolof behind me showed an early afternoon, so the light came through at my back. It'd make it hard to look at me properly. The Dread Empress of Praes sat gracefully at the table, not waiting for my invitation, and set a single parchment scroll on the table. She said nothing, waiting. After a bit I snorted.

"You know, I figure I could play that game," I mused. "Ignore you or insult you, the works. But it just sounds *tiring*."

I pushed off the wall.

"Say your piece," I simply said, "and get the fuck out."

"Your manners have not improved," Malicia calmly replied.

"Could I beat you to death with my bare hands before they came in to restrain me?" I asked. "I'm not sure. If you test my patience, though, we'll find out."

I'd lied, of course. If I was to kill her puppet, I'd definitely use the cane.

"It would avail you nothing," Malicia said. "You were captured, Catherine. This particular game you have lost."

"It's Queen Catherine to you," I smiled, all pretty and friendly and utterly false.

"If I gave you the courtesy, would you return it?" Malicia said. "I think not. Yet I will overlook your many and varied insults, as I have for some time, for you have once again made yourself into an important enough piece you cannot simply be ignored."

Implying that I should treat her the same way. *Good luck with that*, I drily thought.

"I'm still waiting to hear what you want," I said. "To be honest, this is being something of a bore."

"We had a conversation, some years ago, that I believe you must have forgot," Malicia said. "Not so long before Akua's Folly. You asked me about Still Water for the first time."

I did recall that, more or less. I'd warned her that if she'd been behind all of it then she had best watch her step from now on or there would be blood. We'd discussed politics abroad, too, but what did any of it have to do with this? It'd been the Hierarch and the Tyrant that'd been the thick of the talk, and one was pissing off an entire Choir while the other was years dead.

"I told you why Wekesa insisted on trials, that he believed they would revolutionize our understanding of rituals," she prompted.

I frowned, scrounging through my memories. I had pretty good recall, but it'd been years and my Name memories weren't as crisp since the Sisters had brought me back from the brink.

"I asked if it really had," I slowly said, "and you replied..."

"That what he learned would allow us a fighting chance against the Dead King, should he ever wage war upon us," Malicia calmly replied.

Ah, I thought. And there it was. The way she believed she could barter herself out of the grave she'd dug. She had a weapon, maybe even more than one, that she thought could win us the war. Cordelia and I might despise her, but we were pragmatic women at heart: we'd choose survival over hatred. But that went with the assumption that we needed Malicia herself to have those weapons. That my father becoming Dread Emperor wouldn't get us all of it anyway without all that it would cost us to let an empress who'd knifed us at every opportunity walk away with a slap on the wrist. Malicia was no fool, I thought, and so she would have seen the flaw in that plan.

"So what did you do?" I asked. "What poisonous little precaution did you take so you could threaten us with it?"

She'd already done it before, after all, when she'd spread word that by the terms of her treaty with the Dead King so long as she

lived the dead could not invade Callow. Taking her own life as hostage was a favourite trick of hers, the kind of signature that Name tended to take on after years of settling into their Role.

"There was no need for anything too elaborate," the Dread Empress said. "My death would result in all the necessary knowledge burning green, that is all."

Which just meant she had to be taken alive. Had she prepared contingencies for that too? Probably, but I figured there simply wasn't a lot anyone could plan against having Sve Noc peel open your mind before rummaging about for the useful stuff. We'd just have to be quick and careful.

"It's all on the scroll, I take it?" I asked.

"Indeed," Malicia smiled. "Along with a possible solution to the Hellgates issue as suggested by a mage in my service."

"Good," I said, "good."

I moved quickly enough that the cane caught her on the side of the mouth before she saw it coming, but though she fell it didn't make her bleed. Ugh, she'd come decked out in artefacts. I tried to strangle her, but soldiers poured in and wrestled me down before I could get it done. She was ushered out, breathing hard, and I waved mockingly.

"There's always next time," I cackled right before the door closed behind her.

—

I read the scroll that very afternoon.

It was in Malicia's interest to exaggerate what her weapon could do, but she also had to know that Masego would be able to see through anything to egregious in a matter of moments. To my distaste, this might actually work. Wekesa the Warlock had been a brilliant man, and Still Waters had only been used in its most straightforward of applications so far. He'd believed that his creation would be able to turn the tide in two ways.

The first had been that soldiers fighting the Dead King would be made to ingest the alchemical compound and then prepped with the right spell so that when they died they would immediately rise as undead in the service of the Dread Empire. He'd believed that with the right dosages and sorcery it was possible to keep those soldiers largely the same as before their death, nothing like the mindless wights I'd fought at the Doom of Liesse. It would make armies that, even when slain, would rise against just as tireless as their foe and significantly better trained.

The second was more of a gamble. By modifying the alchemical compound so it could enter through the skin, Warlock had believed that necromancers could potentially *usurp* control of corpses from the Dead King. The strength of Still Water was that it wasn't really a ritual, that the active magic was simply an ignition while the alchemy did all the heavy lifting. Which meant if it worked as Warlock had thought it might, we might be able to steal entire armies in moments. I doubted it would go that smoothly, but the prospect of finally having a way to turn the Hidden Horror's endless numbers against him was deeply attractive.

And given that we were well past the days where anything but a direct strike on Keter could win us this war, what was written on this scroll could be an edge that made the difference between the life and death of nations. Malicia was not one to come to a bargaining table poorly armed.

What I read of the proposed solution for Hellgates was largely gibberish to me, and so likely meant for someone better schooled in magic to read over. The only part that was understandable was the one that talked about raising fortresses over the gates after the first rituals were done, to make sure they wouldn't open again. That and the estimates for the number of mages that would be required, which was around two hundred per gate. There simply wasn't anyone but Praes left who could field that many well-trained practitioners, especially since there would need to be some able to use High Arcana.

Another pointed reminder by Malicia that we needed her.

—

On the third day, mages sworn to Wolof came into my cell.

It was all done very properly and politely, but I was still bound while a dozen men and women inspected every inch of me with spells and tried to access the Night. One got bold and tried to see into my mind, but the Sisters took offence to that and melted his eyes. I complained about the smell after they dragged him out, mostly to fuck with them, but several of the mfuasa actually *smiled* and one cast a spell to clear the air. They left after a few hours, carrying back to Sargon Sahelian the answer he'd been hoping they would not give him.

They had not found a way to access the Night through me.

—

I decided that, since I had so much time to spare, I might have a crack at writing my memoirs.

You know, for posterity. Sadly after a single page about my years at the orphanage I got horribly bored and started sketching out

the troop movements for the Battle of Three Hills instead. It was pretty hard stuff, memoirs, I was impressed Aisha had gotten so far in hers. In the end I dropped the subject entirely and instead wrote a scathing critique about the defences of the Vaults, with a particular eye about how easily heroes could have gotten through some of those. I doubted it'd ever amount to anything, but it did make me feel oddly satisfied.

It also allowed me to sharpen a quill until a weapon could be made of it and secrete it away.

—

On the fourth day, I had supper with High Lord Sargon Sahelian. The meal was delicious, he was a delight to talk to and he'd somehow gotten his hands on a bottle of Vale summer wine. Once more wakeleaf was brought to me and I duly indulged, leaning back against the very comfortable seat.

"I offered Princess Vivienne to ransom you back," High Lord Sargon said. "She declined."

"Yes, she would have," I faintly smiled.

"You do not seem displeased," he said, sounding wary.

My smile broadened.

"What is it you asked for – the artefacts or the books?"

A moment of silence.

"The artefacts," he finally said.

Ah, it'd been Malicia's idea then. The books would have been more important to him.

"When I named Vivienne Dartwick my successor," I said, "I didn't pick her name out a hat."

And that was all I said on that. His polite sideways inquiries about my accepting my own ransoming for his library back were just as politely ignored.

—

On the fifth day there was something of an incident.

Or at least so I assumed, as around noon forty armed guards crammed themselves tight in my cell and wards were put up to prevent anyone coming in or out. I finished my meal and, because I was never one to miss an opportunity to be a wretch when it was on the table, I took up Kojo Sahelian's journals and began reading them aloud with great enjoyment – especially the explicit

bits, which by the looks of it made more than a few of these nice soldiers uncomfortable. An hour and a half later they left, but the guard remained doubled and from now on even the veiled servant came in flanked by an armed pair.

Idly I wondered who it was that'd tried to rescue me, and how close they'd gotten. It was only going to get worse for Sargon from now on. That was the trouble when you couldn't kill your prisoner: people would keep trying to free them, knowing there couldn't really be any consequences for it.

—

One the sixth day they were desperate, which I knew the moment Malicia's puppet walked in.

Why else would she be here again? Four soldiers came with the empress, faces hidden by helmet, and they had shackles that I was expected to put on nicely. I had last time, when the mages had come to poke and prod looking for a way into the Night. I knew why the Dread Empress was here, though, and I wasn't going to be anywhere as nice. I pretended to cooperate, at first then the quill I'd sharpened days ago went into the slight gap between helmet and armour and got the first man in the throat. Another I broke the neck of, smashing him into the table, but Malicia ran out before I could get my hands on her.

My cell, and for all the gilding it had never for a moment been anything else and never had I fucking forgot that, my cell was flooded with guards and mages. They got me after I nearly smashed the last of my table legs on scale mail and broke my hand on a helmet. They got the shackles on me and did not heal me. Again there were only four when Malicia came back, face a blank mask.

"Well," I smiled at her through bloodied teeth, "there's always next time."

She went still for half a beat but it was enough. I might be the one bleeding, but I wasn't the one afraid.

"This brings me no pleasure," Malicia said, looking down on me. "It is of your own making."

She did not speak a word, not with her lips anyway. The world pulsed with the echo of it anyway. *Aspect*, my instincts whispered. And in the instant that followed a power seized me by the throat. I gasped out, writhing in my shackles, as a will tried to wrest mine into submission. I was being ordered to do something. Deep inside me the Sisters stirred, their anger a cold and burning thing. They were jealous goddesses, my Crows. But it was not them that calmed me. My fingers clutched at thin air, but still they caught something. Fur, deep and matted and warm. I

laughed, dragging myself up by pulling at nothing. Malicia took a step back, eyes wide.

I felt a great maw open by my head, fangs being bared. My Name had not taken kindly to being given an order. No, more than that. It was not one that recognized the rule of another over me.

*"Mistake,"* I hissed at her in Mthethwa.

The guards were moving, but they didn't get it. They moved to restrain my limbs, to push me down, when they should have gone for my mouth. My eye found Malicia's and I grinned red even as she opened her mouth.

**"Be silent,"** I Spoke.

Her mouth closed. The guards forced me down, but I laughed.

"You overstepped," I told her. "I wonder, does it work only on this body or your real one too? How long are you going to be fighting-"

Finally one of them covered my mouth, shortly before I was gagged, but no matter. The damage had already been done.

It was almost over now.

—

The first time I'd heard about soulboxing, that evening I'd wondered why Dread Emperors did not force it on every High Seat at their coronation. There was, of course, an answer.

On the seventh day, after I had breakfast the veiled servants came and laid out different clothes for me. Black trousers, a black tunic, a black cape and a black eyecloth: all exquisite and embroidered with silver thread. And with them came a circlet of silver, an elegant crown displaying flying crows. Matching silver shackles too, little more than bracelets, but still a symbol of my captivity. I was helped into the clothes by attendants after being informed that I was to be give audience in the Emyrean Hall, and before long I was leaning on my cane and limping down the halls of the palace where I had been held all this time.

Forty soldiers armed to the teeth escorted me, in plate and capes. Ten mages kept an eye on me, amber stares unwavering and their magic so close to them I could taste it in the air. Limping across marble tiles I breathed in the air, stretching under my cape, and I felt Sve Noc reach out for me greedily. I let the Night billow out of me even as shouts echoed across the hall. Swords left their sheaths as the soldiers spun into a circle, runes of light filling their air as incantations reverberated. I closed my eye, smiling, and struck the ground with my cane once.



Shadows spun close, threading themselves through my clothes until it was not mere dark cloth I wore but darkness itself. My foes had thought to dress me, to measure me, but my patronesses had willed it otherwise. I opened my eye, studying my escorts. They were still as stone, but there was a scent in the air I was most familiar with. Fear.

"Ah," I smiled. "*Much better*. Take me to your lord, now."

And they did, wary but obedient. I'd thought the halls I'd run through at night had shown me the splendour of the enchanted ceiling for which the palace was named, but I had been wrong. The Sahelians had kept the heart of the wonder for where they received guests and supplicants, a great hall that was as another world. I stepped across the span of the noonday sky, clouds beneath my feet as my cane cracked against the enchanted stone. The Sahelians had aptly named their hall: I stood here as if I was striding the very Heavens, the sun above and the world below.

On the sides, hidden behind veils, people stood. Sargon's court. Golden-eyed nobles even more beautiful than their clothes, lesser nobles of military turn and even those who wore their sorcery as their signature. Guards, too, and war mages whose eyes missed nothing. I advanced with my escort around me, all leading to the man at the end of the sky. It was against the laws of Praes for any but the Tyrant in the Tower to sit a throne, and so the Sahelians had followed the letter of the law: though Sargon sat a great seat of stone atop a dais, roughly hewn into the shape of roaring lions, further steps still led to a great ornate seat of gold where none sat.

That one was the throne, of course, which meant Sargon's was a mere seat.

No sign of Malicia, I thought. Was she hidden, or had it struck even deeper than I thought when I Spoke? I looked forward to finding out. My escort led me to the feet of the thrones before spreading out, thin invisible barriers that could only be wards separating me from Sargon Sahelian. I stood alone in the silent court until a woman with a beautiful speaking voice broke the stillness.

"Her Majesty Catherine Foundling, Queen of Callow, First Under the Night."

Sargon's face was as a clay mask, all thought and emotion smoothed away. I hummed the first few notes of *Two Dozen Snakes A Knot Do Make*, casting an unimpressed look around. How many of the watching snakes were Sahelians, I wondered? Had to be at least a couple dozen. All of them *hungry*, waiting for the man on the lion throne to falter.

"Quaint," I drawled out.

Oh, they didn't like that at all. But that didn't matter, because even as they murmured their disapproval and glared I kept close to me the answer to a question. Why *didn't* Dread Emperors soulbox all their high nobles the moment they climbed the Tower? Sure they'd be hated for it, and it was certainly tyrannical, but what would most of those madmen have cared? They'd know that the greatest threat to them was the High Seats, that it was well worth the hatred of a few who would likely seek to kill them regardless. The answer was around me, watching the High Lord of Wolof rather than the queenly captive brought before him. The two dozen snakes that made a knot. The Sahelians were a family, not a man.

And none of them would tolerate Wolof being made a tool for the sake a single man, one whose seat they craved like a drowning man craved the shore.

"You are summoned to speak terms of trade, Queen Catherine," High Lord Sargon said.

See, for all their many flaws the Wasteland high nobles they *loved* their family. Not their actual kin, the institution of the family. The High Seat of Wolof, here, and the power that came with it. They were willing to sacrifice a lot to preserve the power of their family, its importance. For all that the great bloodlines of Praes constantly murdered each other for power, they'd also keep a breeding program going for centuries – they knew how to think *long term* in a way that few actual royal dynasties could. It was bred in them, taught to them. They were Sahelians, and only the power of the Sahelians mattered. Nothing else.

I hummed, cane clacking against the floor as I moved and the guards moved with me – like minnows around a shark.

"What need is there for that, High Lord Sargon?" I replied. "If you seek terms, I already gave them when last we parleyed."

"They were frivolously given," Sargon said, voice thundering.

I laughed in his face. Just because he was charming, did he think I'd forgot he was my enemy? That I would safeguard his reputation anymore than I would some other leech's?

"Then let me repeat them, since you have been slow in learning this lesson," I drawled. "I want your treasury. I want your granary. And I want to walk out the open gates of Wolof."

Now the thing was, Sargon didn't want to take this deal. At the start, he'd not actually been worried about what I had stolen and put away in the Night. Sure it was missing right now, but he held me captive and he could wait out the conflict. When I was forced to make a treaty with Malicia, she'd bargain on his behalf for

all of it to be given back. Except that they hadn't counted on Akua. Beautiful, clever Akua who had heard me ramble a few sentences and understood everything I meant. See, we weren't threatening to torch the library and the artefacts. That would have been bad enough, but it wouldn't have lit a fire under them like this did.

Akua had reached out to High Lady Takisha Muraqib of Kahtan and offered to sell her the entire private library of the Sahelians. Because High Lady Takisha was a supporter of Malicia and the last Taghreb high noble in all of Praes, if we actually did sell those books to her Malicia *wouldn't actually be able to get them back later*. It would be a guaranteed rebellion of the entire south of her realm. The Taghreb noblewoman would not doubt have been skeptical, but I was guessing that the Crows had gotten out a book or two for Akua and they'd been sent as a token of goodwill.

The step just past that had, naturally, been to make this known to Wolof.

I could see the layout of it in my mind, clear as if it were ink on parchment. On the third day of my captivity, I thought, Malicia had learned of the offer. It was why the mages had come to look at me, try to get at Night. On the fourth, Sargon had. It was why he'd tried to ransom me to Vivienne and probed my interest in such a deal. On the fifth day, the Woe had tried to free me. It had put the pressure on them, made it clear that sooner or later my people would get me out and they'd be even worse off. On the sixth day, I thought, word of the offer had spread through Wolof widely enough that Sargon's situation had become *dangerous*. And so he'd gotten desperate, agreed that Malicia should try to force me to spit out my loot with an aspect. But that'd failed, badly, and so now here we were. The High Lord of Wolof, the man who'd usurped Tasia Sahelian, looked down at me with burning eyes.

And I knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth, because if he didn't he was going to die.

"Your schemes ran deep, Black Queen," High Lord Sargon Sahelian snarled. "We will bargain. Arrangement can be had, should you sign the proper pact."

"My word isn't enough?" I grinned, badly faking surprise. "Oh dear. I suppose I could sign a pact, if you insist."

The only bone I'd throw him, just enough that he could do this without *entirely* losing face. Humiliating him entirely would just serve to corner him enough he might do something stupid. He was already going to have a rough few months ahead of him. See, the reason that Dread Emperors didn't soulbox all the High Seats was that no family strong enough to be one of those would ever tolerate being led by a pawn. The moment the High Lord went

against their family's interests, they got their throat slit. And what I'd stolen? It was the foundation of Sahelian power. The secrets that kept them one step ahead of everyone, that kept the finest mages of Praes in their service.

And instead of burning them, I'd threatened to sell them to the High Seat that was the *second* best at magic in the empire.

The artefacts that kept their rivals wary, their enemies from picking fights? Akua had offered to sell them to Dread Empress Sepulchral, demons and all. Even Malicia had to have found that an unpleasant surprise. No matter how many spies she had in that camp, three boxes holding demons and enough materials to make a dozen more artefacts was going to be trouble.

And so the Sahelians were looking at Sargon looking at me, because not a single one of those golden-eyed monsters was willing to ruin the power of their centuries-old family to keep High Lord Sargon in his seat. He could accept my terms, or he could have his throat slit before one of his cousins accepted them in his stead. And Malicia would bend here, not just because otherwise the other woman claiming to be Dread Empress would buy a terrifying arsenal but because if she *didn't* bend then Sargon would die. And she would not have the soul of the next High Lord of Wolof in a box.

"One day, Black Queen, this day will come back to haunt you," High Lord Sargon coldly said.

I eyed him up and down, then snorted.

"I beat Akua Sahelian," I said. "Should I now tremble at the shadow of her shadow?"

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On the seventh day, I walked out of the gates of Wolof with everything I wanted and they let me.

## Chapter 11: Descent

*"Loyalty is not opposite of betrayal, but in truth adjacent: to truly place a person or principle above all others is to promise injury to a thousand others."*

— Extract from the prisoner's memoirs of Princess Eliza of Salamans

My soldiers cheered as I rode back into camp.

I'd had a party waiting for me shortly outside the gates, led by Vivienne herself. She'd pulled me in tight for a hug, to my surprise and pleasure, before we took the saddle and headed away

from the prying eyes atop the walls of Wolof. I'd expected there to be something of a strange mood in camp after I'd spent a sennight in captivity, but if anything my sudden return seemed to have been expected. Like I'd been a given that I would pull a trick, find a way out of the pit. It was as once oddly touching and brute burden. Sooner or later, I thought, I would lead them to a doom there would be no bearding. The thought of the look on their faces then had my stomach dropping.

It wouldn't do to return grim-faced, though, so I smiled and laughed and stopped to speak with men and women I recognized. There were more than I'd expected. The First Army had pulled heavily from rank and file of the Fifteenth, back when it'd been first raised, and in some ways it had seen less action than other parts of the Army of Callow. There were fewer holes in the ranks here than there would have been in the Third or the Fourth.

When I first got to my tent it was to a warming sight: all of my closest companions had gathered there. Gods, even Pickler had come and it was even more of a chore to pull her away from her work since Robber had died. Akua kept to the back, tactfully keeping away from Vivienne, but I found her eyes and inclined my head. I'd speak no more of it for now, but I'd not forgot whose scheming it would be that got me out of that cell. Scribe was keeping her company, anyway, another whose presence surprised me. Wine was poured, though little of it – it was before Noon Bell – and I was asked about my time imprisoned. There was a great deal of outrage when I explained I'd pretty much lived in the lap of luxury, with good wine and interesting books.

"It figures even in a cell you'd stumble into a better bed than us," Indrani complained.

"Even got to maul Malicia twice," I cheerfully added.

I had a thousand questions to ask them, but before getting to it I wanted a wash and a change of clothes. Pretty as mine were, I wasn't going to keep wearing what my foes had given me. Masego insisted on inspecting me for illness or enchantments, which I agreed to once I was clean from the dust of the road, and most of them took the hint that I wanted to wash immediately. Hakram lingered, no doubt to brief me on all that I'd missed, but to my surprise so did another.

"A private word, if you please?"

I eyed Scribe with surprise. Over the length of our association she'd made it a point to avoid getting Adjutant out of the room whenever she reported to me, as if to make it perfectly clear that she was not trying to usurp his position at my side. I doubted she would have broken that custom without reason, so I slowly nodded before glancing at Hakram.

"We'll talk before the evening council," I said. "I need to be caught up."

"And more," Hakram gravelled. "The envoys."

Ah, that. Yeah, it made sense the orcs wouldn't begin the journey back to the Steppes until I was out of Wolof. Not only had we been meant to speak again but there would be no point in making a deal with me if I were to stay Malicia's prisoner.

"Bring in Vivienne for that, then," I said.

"I'll see what can be done," the orc drily replied.

He gave Scribe a nod before taking his leave, limping away on his iron leg. That left me alone with the Webweaver in my tent, for the first time in what must have been ages. I poured myself a cup of water with lemon slices in it, asking if she wanted one with a cocked eyebrow. She declined, standing rigidly before my desk. I still couldn't see her face in more than small glimpsed, always half-faded, but from the way she held herself I would have thought her nervous – or at least as close to it as a woman like Eudokia ever came.

"Now you've got me curious," I admitted. "This isn't professional, is it?"

"Not entirely," Scribe admitted. "I would like to make a request of you."

My brow climbed up. That would be a first. I'd sometimes wondered if there was still a woman under the Name or if she'd died when the Calamities had split.

"What about?" I asked.

I wouldn't accept or decline without knowing more, but I didn't actually believe that'd been what she was baiting with her lack of elaboration. She was, I was growing certain, genuinely uncomfortable having this conversation. Was it about Black? No, we'd talked of that before. Of loyalties. It wouldn't make her like... this.

"You still have in your possession the corpse of the soldier that Marshal Nim possessed," Scribe said.

"Marshal Nim can't possess shit, Scribe," I amiably said. "The Black Knight did that."

Neither of us were particularly comfortable matching that Name to anyone but Amadeus of the Green Stretch, but best we got used it. I did not think it likely he would ever resume his old Name, which meant that even if Marshal Nim survived the tussle over the

fate of Praes someone else would step in and fill those shoes. Scribe conceded the point with a nod.

"I would like for it to be passed into my custody," Eudokia the Scribe said.

I blinked. That, uh, hadn't been what I was expecting. I wasn't sure what I actually *had* been expecting, but it was emphatically Not That.

"Masego's studying it," I finally pointed out.

Or at least he'd been doing so when I'd been captured. It'd been too much to hope he would be able to give me the aspect that'd done this, but I wanted at least an understanding of the mechanics involved.

"He believes he has already learned all he can," Scribe said. "I believe he would be amenable to closing the matter, should you ask him."

Huh. She wouldn't even have needed to spy on him for that, I reminded myself. Zeze considered her like an aunt of sorts, he would have simply *told* her if asked.

"So I feasibly could give you the body," I acknowledged. "And we're going to walk right past why I should – for now anyway – to ask instead why you'd want that corpse in the first place. What are you going to use it for?"

She had to know I'd ask, I thought. I was not exactly known for my policy of handing over dead bodies to Named without asking questions. She had to have known, and still she hesitated before answering. That was fascinating to me, given who I was dealing with.

"I want to Inscribe it," the Scribe said.

I swallowed a grin. Oh my, that'd definitely been an aspect. I was finally getting a peek at the juicy secrets of the Calamities, was I?

"And what does that do, exactly?" I asked.

"When I first began to us the method," Scribe quietly said, "it was little more than a trick. I could make my words... weigh more than those of others. Make them linger where they were written."

*But tricks improve*, I thought, and this one she'd refined until it became an aspect.

"By the time I met Amadeus," Scribe said, "I could make eyes and ears of vermin. Sometimes I could even Inscribe instructions onto others that they would be beholden to obey."

I calmly set down my cup on the desk. Living people, living creatures. Yet she was now asking for a corpse.

"You can make corpse-puppets," I said. "And the higher quality the corpse, the better the results."

"The first one I made was a puppet," Scribe said, and I glimpsed a faint smile. "Little better than undead. Yet when I was destroyed, I retrieved the corpse and found that what I had inscribed could be retrieved. That there was more. The inscription had changed. I used the changes, and so the second was... something more."

I breathed out a soft, incredulous laugh as it all fell into place.

"Gods Below," I said. "You madwoman. You actually made a *Named*, didn't you? By fucking accident."

"We began calling him Assassin after the fourteenth iteration," Scribe told me. "Wekesa helped me with the inscriptions that made it coherent enough for sapience, based on the contract Tikoloshe was bound by. Quickly enough we realized that the primary limitation was the quality of the base material. Most bodies could only carry part of the inscription before they began to wither. "

"So you used dead *Named*," I said.

Assassin *had* died over the years, I thought. Dozens and perhaps even hundreds of times. And every time the Scribe had retrieved the corpse, ripped out the inscription and shoved a refine version into another dead hero's corpse. Gods, had that been what my father did with all the Callowan heroes he'd nipped in the bud? Dropped them in some crypt, stashed away until Eudokia needed more materials? I was as appalled by the desecration as I was impressed by the brutal pragmatism.

"This one was possessed by a Black Knight," Scribe said. "I will only be able to Inscribe seven parts in ten, at most, and there will be need for extensive... surgery so the resulting entity has a human silhouette. But he would be a match for the Assassin we were using in the decade prior to the Conquest, by my estimation."

I could think of a way or two to use such an asset, I thought, but I still far from sold. It would, for one, not be *my* asset.

"How much control on the entity do you have, after you Inscribe him?" I asked.

"It cannot refuse a command from me," Scribe said, then grimaced. "I fear you do not fully understand, Queen Catherine. I do not



simply write words on dead flesh when I do this. I give of myself. It is the wholeness of the aspect. He cannot act against what I make of him, because there is nothing else to the entity."

When I had fought Akua in the depths of Liesse, when I had passed through the Fourfold Crossing she laid out before me, I had glimpse of a life in which I had kill the Assassin. Goblinfire had done it, masses of it. *It's not a metaphor when she says she invests her aspect*, I realized. *It's physically in the corpse*. Practically speaking, it was probably why the construct could mimic Named abilities to some degree. The 'Assassin' wouldn't have aspects of its own, but it wasn't just flesh and power either. Not exactly. *So if the body's destroyed with goblinfire or demons it probably ruins her aspect too*, I decided.

"Does Malicia know?" I asked. "Ranger?"

"Ranger does," Eudokia said. "Malicia does not. She is aware that Assassin has 'died' in the past, but believes him to be a manner of wraith possessing bodies."

Which wasn't even entirely wrong, as tended to be the case with the best lies. Huh. That would be a trump card up our sleeve dealing with the empress. Which was probably why Scribe figured I might agree to let her make it. *And it wouldn't be a real Named*, I thought. That had implications, considering the other opponent I was facing here in Praes. An entity with some of the abilities of Named but who could not be manipulated or predicted the way they could? That was a rather more tempting offer than just another knife to pull on the Dread Empress of Praes. The trouble remained, of course, that in the end it wouldn't be *my* sleeve that card was up in. It'd be Scribe's tool, and Scribe's loyalty to me was not on solid foundation.

Her enmity with Malicia was very real, though, I judged. It was what she'd broken with my father over. And she despised the Intercessor as the architect of Sabah's death. Could I trust her, though, to use this almost-Assassin to match those threats instead of pursuing her own goals? I took my cup, sipped at it for a bit as I felt her study me.

"And what do you want to us the thing for?" I asked.

"I would like to assassinate Malicia," Scribe frankly said, "but I recognize that there are political realities and that the Tower is likely too well-defended for an incomplete Assassin. Instead I would commit him under your command to offensive operations against her cause."

That was believable enough, but why would a lie from the Webweaver's mouth would be anything else? Best to be blunt, I decided, and avoid misunderstandings.

"I'm not comfortable with giving you that kind of power when you have no personal loyalty to me," I honestly said. "Especially when we're in Praes. And while I don't doubt you could grant me partial control, I don't have the time to handle that on top of my other responsibilities."

To my mild surprise, she nodded without seeming particularly offended.

"I understand," she said. "In other circumstances I would have offered that Adjutant be placed in stewardship over the entity, but given his coming departure I would venture that Vivienne Dartwick is now the best candidate."

First my right hand and now my successor. She'd picked the names well, couldn't deny that.

"And you'd surrender part of the control without argument?" I said, somewhat skeptical.

"I recognize the investment in trust and resources you are making," Scribe calmly said. "I will not pretend offence, though I *will* remind you I can do significantly more damage to the Grand Alliance with a few letters bearing your fake signature than a dozen Assassins."

I was not unaware of that, but 'I didn't cut your throat with this knife' wasn't much an argument for giving someone a sword either.

"So what is it you do want?" I pressed.

"The right to brief Princess Vivienne on operational opportunities and present targets of my own," Scribe immediately said.

Ah, there it was. Even after she'd been evicted from leadership of the Eyes here in the Dread Empire by Malicia's own spymistress, the Webweaver still had more spies here than Callow did. That meant she'd be able to indirectly guide what we used Assassin for by simple dint of often having better information than we did. I hummed. She could also simply go back on her word and use the entity for whatever the Hells she felt like doing, of course, but that wouldn't be like her. *And though you might yet betray me*, I thought, *even if you do it will be to Black*. I simply couldn't believe he'd order her to use something like the Assassin on anyone dear to me.

"Hierophant will supervise," I finally said.

As much because I wanted someone I trusted in that room as because if I robbed him of the opportunity of witnessing that he'd sulk at me for months. Even through the aspect I saw a

surprisingly girlish smile light up Eudokia's face, as she eagerly agreed and began to thank.

I could only hope, I thought, that I had not just made a grave mistake.

—

The gold and grain began reaching us half past Noon Bell, after I'd washed and Masego had declared be to be in the fullness of health.

It was only good sense to check the merchandise when you bargained with Praesi, so I unleashed Zeze and Akua on the goods while I got caught up with my informal council. There'd been next to no skirmishing in my absence, as it turned out, and Juniper believed what few blows had been traded to have been accidental. Patrols running into each other by happenstance, nothing intentional. As I'd expected it had been Akua – with Vivienne along for formal authority – who'd conducted the negotiations that'd pressured Sargon into my release. High Lady Takisha had been most eager to get her hands on the Sahelian library.

Akua had even tied up the affair neatly by ensuring the three tomes she'd sent south as proof that we did have the library were precious enough the High Lady of Kahtan wouldn't be too miffed by our ending the negotiations. It was a nice touch, and I told her as much.

Sepulchral had been handled more by Vivienne, though, and there the talks had been rockier. Not for any misstep on my heiress' part, but because Abreha Mireembe had wanted more than simply the arsenal the Sahelians kept in their vaults: she'd wanted a formal alliance between us, as well as the backing of the Grand Alliance. Vivienne had put her off by saying we couldn't agree to that without the First Prince's permission and the backing of all four remaining great lines of the Blood, which Sepulchral had recognized for the putting off it was.

"She warned us that the time for sitting the fence is coming to an end," Vivienne told me. "That the civil war will be coming to a close soon, one way or another."

"Or another yet," I mildly said.

High Lord Sargon hadn't been wrong, when he'd implied that Sepulchral was about as trustworthy as a hungry tiger. I'd been happy to throw her the occasional bone so far because she was a thorn in Malicia's side, but I was not enthused as the notion of Abreha Mireembe holding the Tower. She'd probably hold off on backstabbing us until the end of the war on Keter, I figured, but she'd be trouble in the years that followed. Dread Empress Sepulchral would have no real interest in reforming the empire

into something less poisonous to everything it touched, and I honestly suspected that she'd pull out of the Liesse Accords at the first opportunity.

That was not acceptable to me.

"We will need to take inventory of the coin and grain as they come, Catherine, but I believe in both cases our expectations were lower than the reality," Aisha told me. "Wolof's treasury, in particular, appears to have been fuller than we thought."

"My cousin has been sacking the hinterlands of Askum rather relentlessly," Akua noted. "It would not be surprising that he aimed to steal wealth along population."

That or Malicia had been propping up his reign with gold. As had been pointed out to me last year, given that she still drew taxes from most of Praes, half her army was gone and most foreign markets were closed to her the empress was actually sitting on a lot of gold she didn't have that many uses for. Solidifying the position of the High Lord she'd soulboxed would have been a good investment for her.

"How much are we talking, Aisha?" I asked.

"If the wagons are all carrying the same amount of coin, we would be looking at around a million aurelii," the Staff Tribune replied.

I let out a low whistle. In the year after Second Liesse, when the shock of the second largest city in all of Callow and the crisis that'd followed was still hitting us the hardest, my tax revenue for the entire Kingdom of Callow hadn't actually been much higher than that. I let that sink in for a moment.

"Well," I finally said, "I suppose that makes up for the ransom money being stolen back."

That got some smiles, the good mood infectious. It'd been a *long* while since our treasury had been quite so full.

"We'll give a cut of the loot to Razin and Aquiline," I decided. "As they helped us take it."

Maybe a tenth? Much like my own countrymen Levantines tended to get pissy about anything they saw as charity – the pride of our fellow poors, I amusedly thought – so I might have to end up calling it an early wedding gift. The gold ought to help them strengthen their position in Levant after the war, too, assuming we all made it there. I would repay my debt to Tariq Fleetfoot in full, one bite at a time.

"So who was it that tried to rescue me, by the way?" I asked.

"Indrani led the attempt," Vivienne said. "But Masego, the Silver Huntress and the Barrow Sword went as well."

I let out a small whistle. Not a bad lineup, for a jaunt like this. I'd have to ask Archer how far she'd made it, for Sargon to find it worth filling my cell with guards.

"I suppose I ought to encourage that," I drawled. "And since we're rich, we ought to throw a feast before all the gold's gone. Tonight."

"A fire?" Juniper asked, leaning forward.

"It's been too long," I agreed.

My soldiers would get rewards of their own, extra rations and ale casks being broken out to celebrate our successful 'siege' of Wolof, but tonight I'd share a fire with my friends.

—

We did it *proper*.

Akua found us a good place, slightly away from the camp but not too far. Indrani and Hakram dug the pit, Vivienne got the benches and Pickler started the fire. I went with Aisha to obtain a few drinks – some of them smuggled, but we knew those tricks – while Juniper began to roast the pig. Masego rustled up a few wards, just in case, and we got old Legion cooks to make us a pot's worth of the old staples from the War College. By the time the sun came down, we'd claimed our hilltop and seats as Juniper began cutting into the pork and the usual haggling began.

"I *am* a princess, nowadays," Vivienne attempted. "Of Callow, too. Arguably-"

The rib chops were dropped unceremoniously into her plate as I cackled along with Indrani.

"This is borderline treasonous," Vivi whined. "What do I have to do to get a shoulder cut?"

"Be named Aisha Bishara," Hakram drily noted.

"It's a little sad when being royalty doesn't even get you on the right side of nepotism anymore," I said, but then I caught Juniper's hard stare being turned on me, "-is what I would say if I shared her opinion, which is obviously wrong."

I got a satisfied nod for that, letting out a breath for that. I'd gotten used to juicy tenderloin cuts, I wasn't going to let pride get me demoted back to chops. After we'd gotten our plates filled according to the arcane and mysterious system Juniper had developed over our years of companionship – Zeze got downgraded

to leg for having suggested using a magical fire while Indrani got bumped up to fillet for having actually listened during briefings for a whole week – the bottles got opened the drink flowed freely. Aragh and ale, mostly, but some wine too. Nok pale for Akua, to Aisha's profuse mockery, and Vale summer wine from my personal stock.

It was a reality that invitation to these little fires had come to be seen as a prize, a mark of favour from the Black Queen and her inner circle, so while I wasn't going to spoil the whole thing I'd made some concessions to the inevitable. People came by, staying for a time before leaving. Razin and Aquiline were first, curious to try pork cooked in the orc way, and though they wanted to hear of my captivity at first they ended up spellbound by a tale Aisha told about ancient Taghreb legends that claimed her people had some kinship with those of Levant, that they'd been brought west on great ships by strange and cruel gods. It was why Taghreb disliked ships to this day, she told them.

I thought it more likely that the whole living in a desert thing had inspired a healthy dislike for seafaring, but what did I know?

The older Named came by, after that, and with them both Grandmaster Brandon Talbot and General Zola. The Refuge crowd, Silver Huntress and the Concocter, kept close to Archer. Akua caught the latter's interest by speaking about some of the potions her family had accrued over the years and they ended up in an animated discussion in what I believed to be tradetalk, but Alexis the Argent and Indrani mostly spoke to each other in stilted, stiff tones. They didn't argue, I saw, but it was hardly a triumph of diplomacy. *They're trying, though*, I thought. *Or at least Indrani is.*

Juniper and I got into it with General Zola, who'd fought at the Doom of Liesse under General Afolabi. She'd been a supply tribune, then, but their legion had gotten into enough a mess during the battle that it'd been all hands on deck. Pickler actually seemed to be enjoying a talk with Brandon Talbot, to my surprise, though what little I overheard told me why. Marchford had been his home long before it was my personal fiefdom, and it was Pickler I'd once ordered to rebuild the defences there. The walls had been pulled down after the Conquest, but I'd had no intention of leaving my holdings so vulnerable.

Hakram and Ishaq were quietly talking on the other side of the fire, which I considered to be a situation well in hand. The Barrow Sword saw Adjutant as a peer of sorts, and that meant Hakram could work him I ways I could not. I wanted him disposed to pitching in for the peace in Levant after the war, so preparing him for it early was important.

The last to visit were the kids, well after the others, and though I'd expected Sapan to stick to Masego's side as a barnacle the way she usually I instead found that she and Arthur Foundling wanted to hear from me. Like the lordlings my captivity was of interest to them, but more than that they were rather excited by the way High Lord Sargon had been forced to release me even as I lay in his power.

"Look," I said, "there's nothing wrong with a good sword. Stabbing the right people can get a lot done, don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise, but if you want a win that lasts longer than a season you've got to use other levers. The stuff that actually makes the world go round."

"Was it not your use of the Night that forced him to surrender?" Sapan skeptically asked.

"I could have stolen his treasury with Night and it wouldn't have done a thing," I shrugged. "The man who taught me, he was a stark believer in the victory of cleverness over power. I'm not as much of a purist – Gods know I use artefacts much more than he'd be comfortable with – but he was right that power doesn't mean much unless you know how and where to apply it."

"Because it was politics that forced the High Lord to bend," Arthur Foundling frowned. "Not power."

I nodded.

"Night let me take his library, clean out his vaults," I said. "But I knew what to take because I knew what was important to him. The power wouldn't have meant much without the second part."

"The Carrion Lord taught you this?" Sapan asked, a little hurriedly.

As if she'd been going through with it before she could think better, I decided with a grain of amusement.

"He did," I replied. "I'd say it's a shame he's mostly remembered for the number of Named he's killed, but that would be ignoring the fact he probably cultivated that reputation very much on purpose."

"He conquered Callow, ma'am," Arthur quietly said. "They say it was the governors that did most the ugly deeds, afterwards, but he's the one who handed it all to the Empire."

"He's a monster," I calmly agreed. "But he's also one of the cleverest men I've ever met, and ironically enough perhaps the best chance we have for peace between Callow and Praes in the coming decades."

It was why I meant to see him climb the Tower, even now. I could trust my father with the Dread Empire, to curb its worst instincts and tangle it so deeply into the bonds of peace with Callow that it would not be able to free itself of them without breaking. Neither Malicia nor Sepulchral were acceptable alternatives. The trouble was that I was not so sure the man in question wanted to claim the Tower. Maybe at the Salian Peace he had, but it'd been over a year since. And the way he'd left...

The conversation strayed to lighter subjects after that and eventually we sent the kids to bed. That left only us, as it was meant to be, and a second round of bottles was opened. I clenched, suddenly, when I felt Robber's absence like a gut punch. How many ghosts were out there, just beyond the light of our fire? Nauk. Ratface. Hune. I pulled at aragh to chase the thought away and had succeeded in claiming a pleasant degree of inebriation when I caught sight of one of the phalanges approaching Hakram to whisper in his ear. Seeing he had my attention, he gestured for us to move away from the fire and dragged in Vivienne as well. Once we were slightly away from the others, he wasted no time.

"Word from Scribe and the Jacks," Adjutant said. "Armies are moving towards us."

My eyes narrowed. He wouldn't be meaning the forces under Marshal Nim, which had already been headed our way for some time.

"Sepulchral?" Vivienne asked.

He nodded.

"But more," Hakram said. "The deserters as well. They've decamped from the Green Stretched and they're in close pursuit behind the loyalists and the rebels."

Well, it looked like I was overdue a talk with General Sacker. Half the point of becoming her patron was being warned of things like this in advance. I breathed out, trying to parse it out in my mind's eye. The armies of the empresses would reach us weeks before the deserters were in sight, if not months, but they wouldn't have begun to march without a reason. They wanted a piece of this too, in some way or another.

"Northeast of Askum, northwest of Ater," I finally said. "That looks to be our battlefield."

Deep in the Wasteland, which was bloody campaigning grounds for all involved. I wasn't looking forward to that.

"Agreed," Adjutant said. "And it means I can no longer delay my departure. Come morning, we must speak with the envoys and I will leave with them come noon."



I grimaced. I wanted to refuse. I'd just come back and already he was leaving, but I knew it was not a sensible answer. There could be no replacement for Hakram, no one who would mean what he did to his people or who would know my mind as well.

"Tomorrow," I reluctantly agreed.

He must have caught my displeasure, for he squeezed my arm comfortingly with his skeletal hand.

"We still have tonight," Hakram said. "Let's not spoil it yet."

I silently nodded, and after a moment he moved away. Vivienne lingered. I looked up at the night sky, the stars spread out as far as the eye could see and the moon glaring down as a pale eye. At least these days I did not feel irrational hatred at the sight of it.

"Beautiful night," Vivienne quietly said, looking up as well. "Moon's almost full."

"It is," I murmured. "It'll turn soon."

Tonight or tomorrow, but no later.

—

Well past Midnight Bell we began winding down, the drink and heavy meal taking their toll.

Usually we would have slept there, and some of us *had* fallen asleep, but we were outside the camp and in enemy territory still. Wards or not, it would be a risk. So instead everyone was roused and we began making our way back to the palisades, Hakram carrying a half-asleep Vivienne on his back to Indrani's vocal amusement. I hung back with Masego to make sure nothing had been left behind, and after he took down the wards I torched the entire hilltop with blackflame. We were mere miles away from Wolof, the beating heart of sorcery in Praes, so I wasn't going to be taking risks. I was mostly sober by now, having tapered off drinking near the end, so I did not feel vulnerable enough to rush back. I'd intended to walk back with Zeze after he took his last look, but when he did I found that someone else had stayed behind. Atop the burned hill, a golden-eyed shade was standing among the ash. My heart clenched.

Tonight, then. I'd almost hoped it would be tomorrow.

"You go on ahead," I told Masego.

He frowned at me.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

He could see her as well, of course. But it wasn't Masego's way to meddle in what he saw as the personal affairs of his friends. I breathed out.

"I am," I told him.

And he did not ask again. Hesitantly he brushed a hand against my arm and I smiled at him. Nodding and wishing me a good night, he began trodding back to camp. I murmured it back then turned to the hilltop. I limped my way back up through the ash, falling in at Akua's side as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The two of us stood there for a moment, looking up at the night sky. She was the one to break the silence.

"There is a place I would like to show you," she said. "Not far from here."

"Cityside or waterside?" I asked.

"Closer to Sinka," she said, and her eyes asked the question again.

I nodded. It had, I thought, the weight of the inevitable to it. We made our way through the darkness, sure-footed on small and winding paths. It was beautiful, out here. The sight of the orchards touched by moonlight, dappling the ground, the lights of Wolof in the distance as we went downhill towards the Wasaliti. There was little wind but the night was cool, and the thin breeze was enough to lazily stir leaves. We'd not broken the silence as we moved, her leading and I following, but as we crossed a cove of palm trees she began to talk.

"I did not find it myself," Akua said. "It was shown to me, when I was a girl of thirteen."

"Who by?" I asked.

She laughed, the amusement lighting up golden eyes as I caught a flash of pearly teeth.

"Some boy who thought he might become my consort," she said. "Alas, his hopes were greater than his charms."

"And I bet you were just the sweetest girl," I drily replied.

"I was not so terrible, back then," she smiled. "Not so artless as to be taken in, yet hardly the sharpest of irons."

She would have spoken the last part of that sentence with a touch of reverence, once. No longer. It was, if anything, disdain. But then Akua Sahelian was, in her own way, one of the finest liars I had ever seen. She had made a game out of charming my inner circle, and largely succeeded even when some of them had spent *years* despising her. As Aisha had once warned me, that was the

famous peril of the Sahelians: they were so charming and so useful that even the cleverest let them in. And then they turned on you. So how much of it was Akua's truly held beliefs and how much of it the face she wore when around us? There was, in the end, only one way to tell.

The crucible. Trial by fire.

"I barely remember what I was like at thirteen," I admitted. "Feels like a world away."

"Much like you were at seventeen, I imagine," Akua mused. "Swagger covering vigilance, looking every gift horse in the mouth twice. And, in your own way, dangerously insightful."

I coughed to hide my embarrassment. That was the closest she'd come to giving me a genuine compliment – one not wrapped in anything else, honest praise – perhaps since we had first met.

"And terribly easy to embarrass, of course," she teased.

"I wouldn't have been that easy to fluster," I snorted. "For one, unlike you *I* was the one taking the boys to dark corners."

Girls, too, but not as many. I'd tended towards boys when I'd been younger.

"And yet I'm told the redheaded mage you took as a lover had to be the one to seduce you," Akua said.

I'd noticed that she usually avoided using Killian's name. Or talking about her at all, really. Not that it was hard, considering most of my closest friends tended to avoid the subject. Even Juniper, who was not known for shyness or tact, had not hazarded to venture an opinion on that whole debacle.

"It's different when it's someone under your authority," I replied. "I thought there was something there, but I didn't want to..."

"Overstep?" Akua suggested.

I hummed, not disagreeing. In a way. From the moment I'd held command of the Fifteenth I had been both a villain and the apprentice of the Black Knight, both positions that in many ways made me untouchable. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to abuse my position if I cared to, and arguably I had. I'd been very much against Legion regulations to sleep with my own Senior Mage, for one, but rules applied to Named in Praes more or less only when people higher up the ladder said they did. And in my case, Black had been more supportive than anything.

"I'm also not great at taking hints sometimes," I admitted.

"Truly?" Akua said, tone drier than a desert.

I rolled my eye at her. We swerved to the north well before reaching the shore, to my surprise, still we into the cultivate parts of Wolof's surroundings. The side of the hill where she led me, though, was cracked. Old scorch marks still blackened the stone, from some ancient battle, and she guided me through the broken grounds until we reached a tall flat stone covered with moss. Akua passed a hand against it affectionately.

"You'll have to help me move it," she said.

Interest piqued, I put my back into it and we toppled the stone to the side. It revealed a narrow, uneven passage going deeper into the hill. Akua glanced up at the sky, as if checking on the height of the moon, and nodded.

"Now is the best time," she said. "Come."

It was uncomfortable squeezing through the passage and the stone tore at my clothes some, but aside from the burn of my bad leg there was little to hinder me. To my relief the passage led to some sort of broader room, pitch dark – not that the darkness was trouble for me, blessed by the Sisters as I was. Here I could stand to my full height, and Akua almost, but it was still small. She showed a low fold in the stone to our left, though, and after crawling for a foot or so I followed her into a small cavern. I stopped almost immediately after rising, stunned.

It was not a large cavern, perhaps twenty feet wide, and most of the ground was covered by water. The sides had been scarred by spells, like the outside, but here the heat of the spell used has turned entire swaths of stone into something like smooth glass. And what brought it all together was the long opening in the ceiling that looked up straight at the night sky: the moon and stars were reflected perfectly on the water and the walls, as if we had crawled through the earth only to somehow stumble onto a slice of firmament. Akua leaned against wall, water lapping at the stone not far from her feet, and offered me a gentle smile.

She did not say anything, or need to.

I came to stand at her side, enjoying the coolness of the stone. There was no warmth from her, either, though we were almost close enough to touch. She was yet a shade, and a shadow had no warmth to share. We stood there for a long moment, silent and unmoving, as the stars and moon ghosted on stone and water. Eventually I felt her moving closer to me, and said nothing. My stomach tightened.

"Until tonight," Akua quietly said, "I was the only person in all of Creation to know of this place."

I did not ask what had happened to the boy. It was Praes. I knew well what had happened to the boy who had once wanted to be consort to a Sahelian. And I knew, too, what it meant that she had brought me here. Shared a wonder and a secret with me, asking for nothing. But, perhaps, hoping. We had toed the line closer and closer, as the years passed, but the line had always been there. Tonight she had not even touched me, and still somehow it felt as if it had been crossed. I turned enough to look at her but not to invite more. She'd always been gorgeous. I'd thought as much from the first time I'd glimpsed her in that tent.

Often, though, she made a spectacle of it. Magnificent dresses and jewelry, seductive smiles and teasing words. Right now, though, I found not a trace of it on her face. I could barely even make out what she wore, save that it was a dress, and there was nothing seductive about the look on her face. It was, I thought, longing and perhaps something like hunger. There was nothing veiled about it, and the nakedness of that realization had my stomach clench with desire and something else. I did not move, either closer or further away. A moment passed, heavy, and my arm tensed as she slowly began to lean closer – eyes on mine, asking. And I answered the question by turning away, looking down at that field of stars she had stared with me. I did not see her expression. Did not let myself see it, else I hesitate.

I must carry it out to the end, even if it stung. Especially if it stung.

"Even now?" Akua quietly asked, voice ailing.

"Even now," I got out.

"I had thought it would be different," she whispered. "There is... I chose you over my *family*, Catherine. My home. Everything I've loved since I was a girl, save for my father – and even his death I set aside, refusing vengeance on your own for it."

"I know," I said, wretchedly.

But her folly had been the death of Liesse. One hundred thousand lives, every single one of them in my care. *My care*. Even if the Gods Above and Below had demanded of me forgiveness of Akua's folly, it would have been the same answer. I was who I was, and in the end that was a creature of long prices.

"It's not something you can win," I murmured. "That's not how this works."

Because that was the last thing that needed to be stripped away from her so she could truly enter the crucible: the thought that if she was kind, if she was good, if she fought for the cause the two of us might have a future together. It tasted like ash in my

mouth to rip that out of the unspoken between us, but it must be done. The silence stretched out.

"There is no *end* to it, is there?" Akua finally said. "The shadow cast by that day. No sun that will chase it out."

I smiled mirthlessly.

"We all live in it still," I replied.

And always would. I still avoided looking at her, oddly ashamed, and so it was in utter surprise that I felt soft, cool lips press against the corner of my mouth.

"So we do," she said, moving away.

Her golden eyes shone. Could a shade cry? I did not know.

"I would like you to leave, please," Akua Sahelian said.

I didn't argue. All I could wonder was if this was the way Hanno had felt, back in the day, when he flipped his coin and it spun in the air. Before it had landed.

—

By morning she had not come back, as I had known she would not.

## **Interlude: West I**

*"Terror is the hand that rips away the masks. What stays when it has stripped away all the civilized lies we tell ourselves is our truest face, ugly as it is."*

*—Alrich Fenne, first of the Iron Kings*

Life was full of ironies, Prince Frederic Goethal had found.

Death too, he supposed, though circumstance dictated that one's enjoyment of such humour would be severely curtailed. For this jest, however, the Gods Above were yet smiling down on them. The endless armies of the Hidden Horror had smashed themselves against the walls of the Morgentor again and again, hordes beyond counting and horrors beggaring nightmares. The last fortress of Twilight's Pass had held back the madness, as Lycaonese grimly had for centuries, but all the world had known that it was only a matter of time until the Morgentor fell.

There were simply too many of the dead and too few soldiers to stop them, no matter how sharp the courage and tall the walls. All of Procer, perhaps even all of Calernia, had turned its eye to fortress in the frozen north where horror was yet dammed. Like a face cringing away from a blow yet struck.

Yet they had *done* it. Against the odds, against the night and the fear and the endless cruelty of Evil, the Morgentor had held. Towers had fallen, even the fortress itself for a time, but always the armies under Otto and Frederic had taken it back. Even now, as the morn's light fell on the stony grounds below, Prince Frederic stood atop the tower known as the Westenhaupt and knew the living to be the masters of the field. The dead were scattered and burning, the miraculous engines known as Pickler's Nails – *picklernagel* – pounding away at their retreating mass.

Balls of pitch hit the ground, tossed by spindly catapults, spilling blackness where they landed and spreading the flames everywhere. The changes goblin engineering had made here... The Dead King's commanders had grown *wary* of committing beorns to the first wave of the assault, after the fourth time they died without even touching a wall. Wary! The absurdity of that old monster's generals being wary of anything at all had been as fine wine.

It had been night and day. Even after the Hidden Horror plied fresh tricks and opened a gate into the very Hells, the lines had buckled yet stubbornly refused to break. With valour and fire, the armies of the west had held back the tide even as all the world expected them to fall. But life was full of delightful, cruel ironies and so it had not mattered. To the southeast the Hocheben Heights had fallen: the dead were now pouring into Bremen like an unstoppable tide, burning and killing as they went.

The Morgentor had not fallen but it was going to have to be *abandoned*, lest the dead march north and surround it entirely.

The Kingfisher Prince looked down at the fleeing dead, sword in hand and fingers tight on the grip. Two years he'd fought here. Bled here, with the hard-faced soldiers at his side. The Morgentor was hundreds of miles from the borders of Brus, but he fancied he now knew the fortress as well as if he had been born here. It was not his home, but Frederic had well thought it might be his grave before it all ended. It was... frustrating to abandon it like this. The prince knew well the strategic necessity – already it would be a hard campaign to push south through the enemy invading Bremen, to be enveloped here was death – yet what the mind knew the heart disavowed. It tasted like defeat, leaving.

It was in the soldiers around him too, he could feel it. **Aid** fluttered in him like butterfly wings, urging him to help but not quite knowing how. Westenhaupt was heavy on Neustrians, whose home was south of Bremen was now next to fall, but that stern lot was no more inclined to leave than the rest. Garbed in steel and iron the soldiers milled about the rampart, talking in terse Reitz and keeping an eye on the wyrms in the distance. Even

Frederic's own retinue was in a dark mood. Such a small thing, pride, but was it not the smallest of axles on which the world rested? Small wounds could kill an army if left to fester.

Yet what could he do?

"It is finished for the day, my prince. The curs will not return until they have greater numbers than this to field."

Frederic glanced at his captain – a distant cousin of his, he'd been given to understand – who'd addressed him and nodded agreement.

"They'll be back under cover of darkness," the Prince of Brus said.

Even with goblin spotters, night had the living at a disadvantage. The span they'd just bought, however, would be the opportunity of their departure. The armies had been ready to decamp and march south for days, it was only the constant assaults of the Enemy that'd kept them still. A fighting retreat all the way to Bremen would be... difficult, even for veterans like these. The soldiers around them had been listening without even the pretence otherwise and a familiar officer stepped forward, Captain Fredda of the Neustrian royal army.

"It is done, then," she said. "We will flee south?"

The question was blunt, but more importantly reflected on the faces of most around them. **Aid** fluttered in him still, insistent. The Kingfisher Prince looked away, down at the fleeing throng of corpses. What could he claim?

"We will be back," Frederic said. "And so will they."

Grim nods, but the arrow had missed. The Kingfisher Prince thought, for a moment, of what Otto would say in his place. Something stern, do doubt. They were a stern and unflinching lot, the Reitzenberg. The Prince of Bremen was called Otto Redcrown by men for the proof of that, the same stubborn charge that'd killed his father and two elder sisters before the crown passed to him and he carried it to its end. And like that, Frederic found his answer.

"It begins now, our war," the Prince of Brus said.

That claimed their attention.

"We will march south," Frederic Goethal said. "Through Bremen and Neustria, through my own Brus in time, but though battles await us on that path it cannot be called a campaign."

He smiled.



"It is a *muster*," the prince said. "The last muster we have in us, the last gasp of Procer. And you all know where we will strike, once the strength of the east and the west is gathered."

The Kingfisher Prince raised his sword, pointed it east. Where, beyond mountains and lakes and clouds of poison, lay the Crown of the Dead. Keter, the Hidden Horror's seat of power.

"You call it fleeing," the Kingfisher Prince laughed, "but you should know better, Fredda. Today, at long last, we begin our march on Keter."

And inside of him the wings ceased fluttering at last, a smile from Above, as all around him backs straightened and stares hardened. Frederic had not lied, after all. The dead would chase them south relentlessly, until the time came for the last battle of this war. Frederic Goethal watched the corpses fleeing below one last time, fingers tight around his sword. Doom had come for the Principate of Procer, doom as no realm of man had ever known before.

They would meet that end, the Kingfisher Prince swore, straight-backed and proud.

—

The blow had split open her helm.

A shallow cut, she'd been lucky, but head wounds always bled ugly. Rozala Malanza, Princess of Aequitan, ripped off the straps of her helmet and tossed it away. It was useless now anyway and shaking free her sweaty hair was a small pleasure. Irritated at the delay, she glared at the priest laying his hands on her back.

"Hurry up, would you?" the dark-haired princess bit out.

A cleared throat followed and she glanced guiltily at Louis Rohanon, the former prince of Creusens who was now her formal secretary. And something rather more thrilling, in private, though that was best kept quiet.

"It would be easier if you dismounted," Louis mildly said.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to get back on my horse if I do," Rozala admitted.

Russet eyes narrowed, but he knew better than to argue against her getting back into the thick of the fight. The Princess of Aequitan was not the kind of general that shied away from the melee: it was why men followed her into the dark. She asked them to brave no peril she was not willing to risk at their side. Louis simply nodded, even though he disapproved, and she felt a sudden swell of affection. He was a wonderful lover, but she had

often thought he could be more should politics allow. Perhaps even if not. She had come to suspect there might be... other considerations. The dark-haired princess laid a hand on her belly. It was still too early to tell, but there were signs.

"The Levantines are still holding strong out west," Louis told her. "But the Red Knight sent word that the Hawk has been nipping at them all afternoon. Lord Yannu took an arrow but he still lives."

Rozala grimaced, the Light wielded by the priest at her side finally reaching her scalp. The wound began to mend.

"Someone really needs to kill that thing for good," Rozala cursed. "And the eastern flank?"

"Still harassed by skirmishers, but the Cleven horse is scattering them," Louis said. "If we can push through to the south, we have our path to Peroulet."

Where the last line of defence for the principality of Cleves would stand. How quicky the wind had turned against them, Rozala thought. But a few months ago she had triumphed at the Battle of Trifelin then resisted the siege that followed in the victory's wake. Even the opening of the Hellgate had not been enough to dislodge her. Yet the Hidden Horror, while losing battles, had found ways to win the war. As he had done to the Lycaonese up north, he had done to her here in Cleves: when the neck did not bend, he had struck the ribs. Rozala had lost the western coast while pinned in Trifelin so and seen herself at risk of being surrounded should the city of Atandor fall.

Cordelia Hasenbach had sent the order to retreat south to Peroulet before she could even consider a stratagem to turn this around. And though part of her had wanted to fight the First Prince's command to retreat, Rozala had known it to be the right decision. Cleves was good as lost and there would be no reinforcements coming until it was far, far too late. It had been good that she'd not dallied out of pique, for Atandor had fallen earlier than anticipated and the army that'd taken it had swung north to attack her from behind as she already led her armies into a fighting retreat. For three days now her forces had been fighting the dead in heavy skirmishes, the Hidden Horror trying to mire her out here in the open instead of behind the walls of Peroulet.

She would not give the old monster his wish.

"Find me a helmet," Princess Rozala asked her lover. "And a fresh lance. We must pierce through, else half of us will be corpses come morning."

"Both are already on their way," Louis replied, ruefully smiling.

Rozala almost leaned down to kiss him, holding herself back at the very last moment. His lips quirked anyway. Rising her saddle, caressing her charger's neck, she turned her gaze to the field in the distance. They would make it to Peroulet, that much she would swear to any Gods that cared enough to listen. After, however... That fortress would be the last holdout before the hordes of the Dead King broke into the plains to the south. *And if they do then Principate is dead*, Rozala thought. It was a harsh thing, to realize that she had already given all the ground that she could afford to give. The moment she raised her banner over Peroulet, Rozala Malanza's back would be to the wall. And the terrible truth was that, beneath all the oaths and speeches, the Princess of Aquitan was not sure she could hold the city.

No, that was a lie. She knew she would lose those walls. It was only a question of how long she could eke out before she did.

Breathing out, Princess Rozala Malanza accepted the helmet her lover pressed into her hand, setting it atop the crown of her head. A lance filled her hand, familiar weight, and she looked up at the sunny afternoon sky. They must first survive today, she reminded herself, before being troubled by tomorrow.

"One miracle at a time," Rozala murmured into the wind, and rode back to war.

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The First Prince thought it would look much like this, if an empire could see the headsman's axe coming down on its neck.

The Morgentor had fallen. Rhenia had fallen. Bremen was halfway into the grave. The sole major military force left in northern Procer, under the command of the princes of Brus and Bremen, was fighting through the horde so it could make it to the temporary safety of Neustria. Cordelia had done all she could to evacuate her people further south, into Segovia, but many had stayed. Too many. Lycaonese, she should have remembered, were a stubborn lot. They were not retreating, not leaving. They would fight the dead fiercely for every league of stone, every river, every hill and forest and muddy road. It was the old fight, the old duty. The walls must hold, lest dawn fail.

That pride might yet kill them all, and with every passing day Cordelia Hasenbach could do less to ward away that fate.

Cleves was holding better, but barely. A ring of forts had been raised along the line drawn by Peroulet, after Cordelia drew from the refugee camps for labour. Food and places on carts headed south for the families of those who accepted had earned her enough volunteers that pits could be dug, palisades raised and stones stacked fast enough it could almost be called a miracle. The First Prince knew better. If there was one thing the

Principate still had plenty of, it was hands that could be put to work. The entire effort had felt much like raising a sandcastle to stop the tide, but the fair-haired princess had gritted her teeth and seen it done regardless. Despair was not worth a whistle. If Cordelia failed, it would be after she had moved Heavens and earth trying.

Even from Hainaut the news was grim. General Abigail had been dislodged from the Cigelin Sisters by an enemy offensive, though she'd retreated in good order to Lauzon's Hollow after covering her retreat with swaths of goblinfire. The White Knight's crushing victory at Juvelun had secured the eastern passage, for now at least, but all of Cordelia's generals agreed it was now only a matter of time until the Army of Callow was pushed back to the old defence lines at Neustal. And once that was the case, once all that stood between Procer and annihilation was forts from the hills of western Cleves to eastern Hainaut, then it would be the beginning of the end. The Dead King would hold the shores of the lakes and be able to cross unimpeded.

Looking at the grey stealing inch after inch of the exquisite map at the heart of the Vogue Archive, Cordelia Hasenbach could almost hear the whistling sound the axe was making as it came down on the neck of the Principate of Procer.

Though tastefully clothed and as rested as she could afford to be, Cordelia could not help but feeling worn to the bone. It showed, too, in some ineffable part of her. She'd glimpsed it in her looking glass, that subtle quality that came from a tool being worked 'til it was near breaking. Yet the fire in her belly would not let her close her eyes, not when every missed opportunity was a few hundred more of the people in her care sent to the grave. The First Prince heard the Forgetful Librarian approach, recognizing the footsteps, and afforded the other woman a questioning glance.

"Word from the Dominion just came," the Damned said. "It worked."

Cordelia did not hide her surprise quite quickly enough.

"They agreed to the oaths?" she pressed.

"Every major line of the Blood swore oaths that the seneschal of Levante is to hold the city until the end of the war, when the Majilis will convene to settle the succession of the Isbili," the Librarian confirmed. "The peace-oaths were not as widespread, but the rumours the Circle seeded seem to have moved public opinion where you wanted."

This time it was a smile she hid. Cordelia had ordered that word be spread the Grey Pilgrim had died wishing for peace between Levantines before his sacrifice at the Battle of Hainaut, which would have meant little in Procer but carried a great deal of

weight in the Dominion. He had been revered as half a god, in those parts. There would still be bandits and raiders that took advantage of the chaos, but the spectre of the Peregrine's disapproval would stay many a hand. Perhaps, if she were lucky, enough that the Dominion of Levant did not collapse into utter anarchy. Methodical anarchy, at least, she would be able to prop up for a little longer still.

Long enough that if she no longer could, it was because Cordelia could do nothing at all.

"We can turn our attention to the League, then," the First Prince said. "Have our envoys to Bellerophon sent word back yet?"

"Yes," the Librarian grimaced. "That they have yet to be received by the expedition's generals."

The Republic of Bellerophon had, to almost universal surprised, succeeded at assembling an army and sweeping over the last holdings of Penthes. Unfortunately, the victorious citizen-soldiers had then begun a siege of the city-state that they were very unlikely to be able to carry out successfully. Cordelia would have had little issue with this, had General Basilia not been leading a coalition army east with the intention of besieging that very same city only to find that there was already an army camped beneath its walls. Given that Basilia had bought dwarven engines so that she would at least be able to breach the walls of Penthes and put an end to the war she'd begun, this was a... frustrating situation.

The Secretariat of Delos had invited her to mediate a peace between the parties involved, but while Helike and its vassals were amenable the Republic was proving to be rather more obstinate. The People had voted that Anaxares the Diplomat yet lived, and so was still Hierarch of the League of Free Cities. As a consequence, it was illegal for them to receive foreign envoys. The situation in the south had therefore turned into a farce of standoff under the walls of Penthes, General Basilia having refused to give battle and instead sent war parties to pillage the Penthesian countryside. She was, Cordelia suspected, trying to earn back what she had spent on those dwarven war engines.

"Then we lean on Atalante," the First Prince said. "If they consent, Delos could at last call a formal session of the League of Free Cities."

The end of hostilities that entailed could be used to force Bellerophon back to its territory, given that the republic still claimed to be loyal to its lost Hierarch. If General Basilia could steal a march on Bellerophon when hostilities resumed after, she could claim the siege first and finally bring the civil war to an end. Beginning to consider how the ruling priests might be convinced to end their self-imposed isolation, Cordelia

ceased when she saw a messenger come for her. She glanced at the Librarian, who snorted before taking the offered scroll for her. It was given unto her afterwards, however, and she frowned. The head of the Circle of Thorns, Louis de Sartrons, claimed he had urgent news.

And to think she had almost begun to find a silver lining to the cloud.

Cordelia wasted no time in heading towards the salon where her spymaster would be waiting. The conversation would trouble her carefully arranged schedule if it ran for too long, and she had an obligation that could not be put off later that evening, but she would have to adapt. Louis de Sartrons was not the kind of man to call anything *urgent* without good reason. Within moment of sitting across from him and taking a polite sip at the served tea, the skeletally thin older man spoke a sentence that chilled her blood.

"The Dead King is looking for the ealamal."

Cordelia carefully set down the cup, painted porcelain of exquisite delicacy. She did not ask whether or not her spymaster was certain, as it would be an insult to the both of them.

"Has he found it?" she asked instead, forcing calm.

"I believe not," Louis de Sartrons replied. "A Revenant was caught in southern Lyonis and another was seen in Lange, but the facility in Brabant has not been breached."

It would not be catastrophic even if it were, Cordelia reminded herself. Brabant had been judged too close to the enemy, and so the weapon had been moved into southeastern Aisne.

"Destroy it," Cordelia ordered. "We must be sure the Enemy learns as little as he can."

"I will see it done," her spymaster agreed, then thinly smiled. "It may very well be only a matter of time until it is found regardless of any measure, Your Highness. Unless we let Chosen see to the defences-"

"We will not," the First Prince sharply interrupted.

She would not let the White Knight usurp control of the weapon. It had been made of the corpse of an angel of Judgement, there could be no pretence of Hanno of Arwad not becoming its master as soon as he laid hands on it – and he would, if any of the Chosen took up guarding the ealamal. The loyalty of the heroes went first to their champion, and the White Knight had already proved himself untrustworthy in the Arsenal. Cordelia would not make the same mistake twice.

"Then the best we can deliver is delay, Your Highness," Louis de Sartrons blandly said. "And I would consider Sister Alberte's proposal that a limited test be attempted. Otherwise we know too little of the weapon for it to be considered usable, in my opinion."

The First Prince hesitated, staying silent. It had been the question that plagued them all ever since the Salian Peace. What would a weapon made of a fallen angel of Judgement do, if Judgement was kept silent by a madman? The Hidden Horror himself had claimed that the Tyrant of Helike had spared them all a great doom by arranging for the Hierarch to do this, and the secrets unearthed in Levant last year had borne this true in part. If the Intercessor truly could influence angels, using the ealamal would have been a mistake. It would have given that enigmatic monster power of life and death over half of Calernia. Yet with the Hierarch staying true to his course of obstruction, the situation had changed again.

If the ealamal could be used without the Intercessor's meddling, then Cordelia still had a way to prevent the fall of Calernia. If. Only none could tell her what the weapon might do without the guidance of angels behind it, and there was no known precedent to draw on. What way but a test was there to gain an answer? A small use, limited in scope, but still a use. The First Prince was inclined to agree with her spymaster of the necessity, but it was not so simple as that. There was another crowned head whose assent must be gained before that, lest in chasing ghosts Cordelia make an enemy of the living. Catherine Foundling had not been shy in voicing her disapproval of the entire affair, and absurdly enough the Black Queen was now Cordelia's closest and most important ally.

"I am to speak with the Black Queen tonight," she finally said. "The subject will be broached."

"That is all I can ask, Your Highness," Louis de Sartrons said, bowing his head.

—

The parlour had been refurbished from floor to ceiling when it was first dedicated to a new purpose, that of serving as the scrying room the First Prince of Procer would use to speak with the Queen of Callow. An entire wall had been covered by a beautiful silver mirror while the plush sofas had been replaced by a beautiful yet severe set of Lycaonese armchairs and tables. Bureaus had been filled with papers which might be of use in discussion, the latest reports and predictions, while the walls were covered with maps and tapestries. Every detail had been tailored according to what her agents believed to be the preferences of Catherine Foundling.

Though Cordelia doubted their common amiability could be traced back to these changes, it had to be said that at least the change of furniture had ensured that the Black Queen would no longer eye the more elaborate Alamans furnishings with barely veiled disdain. The First Prince was in some ways rather amused by the other royal's disdain for luxuries, considering that for all her severe inclinations she was likely one of the wealthiest women in all of Calernia these days.

The First Prince of Procer poured herself a cup of mead and set the pitcher down on the table before slipping into the armchair – discreetly made more comfortable with cushions – and allowed herself to take a sip. Unlike the Black Queen, who usually guzzled wine as if it were water while they talked, she moderated herself. It made it all the more frustrating that the drink usually came to redden her cheeks before it did the other ruler's, to be frank. Before she had even set down the cup, the surface of the mirror before her rippled. It took a moment for the wizards of the Observatory in Laure to bind her to the Hierophant's spell in Praes, but hardly more than a few breaths.

On the other side of the mirror the Black Queen, looking as tired as Cordelia herself felt, offered her a lopsided grin.

"Your Highness," Queen Catherine of Callow said.

"Your Majesty," First Prince Cordelia of Procer replied.

Catherine Foundling could be striking on a good day, but this did not seem to be one of them. Her clothes were ruffled, her expression drawn and there was no sign of the ruinous charisma that had drawn so many to her causes – fair and foul. The cloth covering the eye she'd lost in Hainaut was slightly askew, which made her sharp cheekbones stand out more than usual. Cordelia almost wished she had not taken the time to put on a fine dress in Rhenian blue herself, but only almost. Even if Foundling noticed the difference between them, which a slight frown told Cordelia she had, the queen was always easier to deal with when the Lycaonese princess was dressed becomingly.

The Black Queen's wandering eye was well-known, and Cordelia had not gotten where she was by refusing to use the arrows in her quiver.

"A trying day?" the First Prince asked.

The tanned woman – even darker of skin, now that she campaigned under the Wasteland sun – barked out a laugh.

"In a way," the Black Queen said. "I have what I came for: High Lord Sargon's granary and his treasury are secured and ready to be moved. I can begin heading south for a decisive battle."



"A great victory," Cordelia said, meaning every word.

The city of Wolof was famous even in her native Rhenia, known as a great fortress that'd broken the same armies that had taken Ater and brought down the Tower. That Foundling had beggared it without even having to storm the walls or losing more than a handful of men was the kind of feat a reputation could be made of, were the Black Queen's own not far beyond such tales nowadays.

"So they tell me," Catherine Foundling tiredly said. "Akua Sahelian left my camp two days ago. Our spies in Wolof tell me she has entered the Empyrean Palace."

Cordelia, knowing the Doom of Liesse to be a thorny matter, took a sip from her mead as she chose her words.

"Her desertion is as you predicted," the First Prince said. "And planned for."

The other woman winced.

"If I might give you a word of advice?"

Cordelia cocked a brow but nodded.

"I wouldn't ever say anything that could be construed as a variation on 'just as planned'," the Black Queen said, and she seemed completely serious. "That never ends well."

The blonde princess leaned back into her seat. It was absurd enough advice, on the surface, but it was no fool giving it.

"One of the obscure rules of... Named, I take it," Cordelia said, deciding using Chosen or Damned would be undiplomatic.

"More for villains than heroes," the Black Queen said, "but it's best steered clear of across the board. Sharp irony tends to ensure."

"I will keep it in mind when dealing with Named," Cordelia replied.

It was useful information and there was no denying that in these matters Catherine Foundling was a great deal more learned than Frederic Goethal, who Cordelia had attempted to learn from only to find his knowledge of the affairs of Chosen to be rather shallow. The likes of the Peregrine and the Black Queen seemed, unfortunately, to be quite rare.

"Might be useful for you to keep in mind period," the queen drawled.

"While I appreciate the implicit compliment, I am not Chosen," Cordelia flatly said.

The other woman leaned back into her seat, inside that campaign tent of hers. She took up a goblet of what looked like that truly horrid orcish liquor – aragh – and knocked it back, offering a toothy smile afterwards.

"Maybe not right now," the Black Queen said. "But I wouldn't bet on that staying true forever. Vivienne tells me you've gotten Levant back into a semblance of order."

The heiress to Callow would have read the report earlier. It seemed an odd change of subject, but likely wasn't. These little detours were a staple of conversation with Catherine Foundling, she had learned.

"Lady Itima's contributions were key," Cordelia said. "But I will agree that the Dominion has somewhat stabilized."

"Yeah," the Queen of Callow drawled, rolling her eye. "I'm sure *Itima Ifriqui* was the one who came up with that oath and propaganda plan. Seems right up her alley, that play."

Cordelia's lips thinned.

"You have a point, I imagine?"

"You got Levant in order," the Black Queen said. "You're keeping Procer from falling apart and taking the lead in the fight against the Dead King. There's a title for someone who does that, Hasenbach."

Ah, were they now dispensing with titles? Foundling usually on began that a few drinks in.

"Is there?" the First Prince replied, skeptical.

"Sure," Foundling shrugged. "Warden of the West. What a fun coincidence that you happen to already bear it."

"That door lay open before me once," Cordelia coldly said. "I did not step through the threshold. It is not a choice I regret."

"You didn't take the Name, maybe," the Black Queen said. "But the Role, you made it yours anyway. There's not a pie west of the Whitecaps you don't have your finger in. Might take a year, might take twenty, but Creation will answer to the truth of that."

She smiled, looking fearsome and sympathetic both.

"You can swim against the river all you like, Cordelia Hasenbach," she said. "It won't get tired before you do."

The genuine sympathy in the other woman's voice made it a harder blow than if she'd been cruel. It sounded like something she truly did believe. And though this talk of Name and Role was... esoteric, there seemed to be some manner of logic to it. However tortured. *And though you are a madwoman, Catherine Foundling, Cordelia thought, you might just be the cleverest madwoman alive.* This was not an assertion to be lightly dismissed.

"I will heed your warning," the First Prince said, politely calling the subject to a close.

Foundling nodded, looking almost nonchalant. She was... loose tonight, Cordelia decided. Less controlled than usual. And for all her drinking and seeming carelessness, the Black Queen usually kept close mastery of herself. This, though, seemed unguarded.

"Does Sahelian's betrayal truly trouble you so?" the fair-haired princess quietly asked. "You told me of its coming months ago."

"It stings," Catherine Foundling artlessly confessed. "I didn't think it would. Wasn't sure it would, maybe."

"And still you went forward with this scheme," Cordelia said. "Why? There are less convoluted ways to take revenge, Foundling. And I did not question your plans, for this is an affair of Named and Callowan besides, but I will admit I find what I know of this to be baffling."

The one-eyed queen's lips quirked. That had, somehow, pleased her to hear. She truly took as compliments the strangest of things.

"It's not just about revenge," the Black Queen said. "It's... hard to articulate."

Cordelia was not so sure. She thought it might instead be that it was the simplest thing to articulate in the world, but that the queen across the mirror would resist speaking those words to the bitter end. It was a shocking thought, that Catherine Foundling might have affections for the woman that'd destroyed Liesse, but in a way fascinating as well. Cordelia was not certain whether it was the tint of tragedy to the whole affair or simply that she had never before met someone with such spectacularly terrible taste in women before, but the perhaps the truth lay somewhere in the middle.

"A strange revenge indeed, to return her home and to the Tower's service after having been one of your inner circle," Cordelia mildly said. "Unless you have sabotaged her prospects?"

The Black Queen grinned, a vicious slice of ivory.

"Oh, not at all," Catherine Foundling said. "She is going to get everything that she ever wanted."

The queen poured herself another cupful of liquor.

"But that's the thing with Praes, see," she continued. "You get whatever you want, but never the way you want it."

"It is your campaign to lead," Cordelia finally said. "And I cannot gainsay your results so far."

"It'll be a battle next," Foundling opined. "A convergence. The fate of Praes going forward is going to be wrestled over. And after that..."

"Ater," the First Prince completed.

"It ends there," the Black Queen said. "I'll get it done, Cordelia. I know the stakes. I'll muster the East and we'll come with its full array of war."

And the truth was that the First Prince believed her. Because the two of them had grown beyond enmity, even as enemies, and though they were not friends – would never be – a trust had grown between them. You could only share the burden of the world on your back with someone for so long before you took to them, even a little.

"We don't have long left," Cordelia quietly admitted. "We are giving ground on all fronts now. And the southern principalities are beginning to buck my authority, slowly but surely. I expect there will be defections before you return."

There was only so long people were willing to have the lifeblood squeezed out of them to support a war they'd never seen with their own eyes. And though Cordelia had pushed through the Highest Assembly measures that would buy the realm a few more months, the hard measures she'd relied on to see it done had made her enemies.

"You're keeping up the sky with your back, Hasenbach," the Black Queen replied, tone oddly gentle. "I don't expect the impossible of you. If it were anyone else in your seat, this war would already be lost."

"We might lose it anyway," Cordelia said, and hesitated.

It was now, she thought or never.

"The ealamal," the First Prince said. "I want to find out what it does with Judgement silenced. In case..."

In case they lost the war, she left unsaid. The Black Queen grimaced.

"You want a test," she said.

Cordelia nodded. Added nothing more.

"Fuck," Catherine Foundling cursed, leaning back into her seat.

There was a long moment of silence.

"Crows take me. *Do it.*"

## **Interlude: East I**

*"As a rule, principles are trouble. If you have them, unprincipled men will despise you. If you do not have them, principled men will despise you. My advice, my son, is therefore to choose terribly mediocre principles but keep to them religiously."*

*– Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthe of Nicae*

"And the nature of her alliance with the First Prince?"

Akua Sahelian had found that betrayal was not unlike putting on an old dress. The cut did not quite fit as it would have once did, but there was a certain comfort in the... familiarity of the object. Sargon had been dear enough to grant her use of the family's finest scrying mirrors – ancient artefacts, tall as a man and twice as broad – so the illusion that she was seated at a table in the same council room as the Dread Empress of Praes was rather convincing. The clarity of the spell allowed for the game to be played as if they were in person, Malicia reading her face as she read Malicia's. It was rather invigorating to fence this way with a woman of the empress' calibre.

"Largely a result of common interests," Akua said. "There is a surprising degree of trust there, but that is not unexpected after Catherine's restraint during the Peace of Salia."

Callow had been well positioned to extort Procer when the time had come for bargaining. There was not much the First Prince could have afforded to do but bend, given the imminent collapse of her realm if she did not, but Catherine had instead chosen to court goodwill. Given how important the trust between the two greatest rulers of the Great Alliance had become, and the veiled frustration on Malicia's face when she spoke of Procer, Akua was inclined to believe it had been the right decision to make.

"There has been some method to her recklessness," Malicia conceded. "Your opinion, then, on her relationship with Yannu Marave and Itima Ifriqui?"

Oh my, she truly *was* frustrated. Mentioning those two names – the two heads of the great lines of the Blood that were not Catherine's informal pupils – was a tacit admission that Malicia was trying to get a peace here in Praes by getting the broader Grand Alliance to twist Callow's arm into accepting it. No doubt she'd already tried Cordelia Hasenbach and been rebuffed, so she was now looking for other angles of approach. Unfortunately for the empress, the Dominion was dead grounds in this regard.

"She is highly respected, due to her role in the Grey Pilgrim's resurrection after the Princes' Graveyard," Akua said. "I don't believe she has spoken much with the Lady of Vaccei at all, but she has a solid accord with Lord Yannu."

Akua decided to keep it up her sleeve that not a single one of the Blood would dare to cross Catherine at the moment. Not while she had the Barrow Sword at her side and they very much wanted to avoid her protection of him extending beyond the confines of the war. If she kept meddling in the politics of Levant that might change, but for now having both fear and respect at her back meant that Malicia would find no purchase with the Levantines. It might be amusing to see her fail in the attempt, however, so Akua offered her empress a pleasant smile instead of potentially useful information.

"Her talent for ingratiating herself to key individuals is proving to be an obstacle," Malicia deplored.

And perhaps Akua would have agreed, as a girl, when she could only think of strength through the Empire's conception of it. An outlook that would claim Catherine was ahead because of a superior quality. In this case, Malicia seemed to have decided it was talent for making alliances at the highest rungs of power. To triumph over her the Dread Empress would have to bring her own superior qualities to bear and decisively beat her opponent. Yet the old certitudes no longer rang so true. *Praes is so deeply despised out west nowadays that Hasenbach could not agree to a bargain even if it were advantageous*, Akua thought. *That is not of Catherine's making.*

The Dread Empress had won too many battles, ceasing to question if they needed to be fought at all. Victory was a heady brew, Akua knew better than most, but she was surprised that Malicia would fall prey to such a mistake. The empress had always struck her as being an exquisitely self-controlled woman. Then again, the Carrion Lord was involved. It was always harder to see clearly when the cut was so close to the heart.

Akua knew that too, and learned the lesson roughly enough it still left the edges of her raw.

"The Dead King has forced together strange alliances," she simply said.

Malicia looked amused, understanding the sentence for the veiled reference that it was.

"How have you found the body?" the empress asked.

Akua closed the fingers of her right hand into a fist, enjoying the sensation of skin on skin. It had been almost overwhelming at first: her time as a shade had blurred the memory of what sensations actually felt like. Returning to the real thing after the pale shadow she'd lived with had needed some adjustment. There was an even greater boon attached, of course. Akua murmured a single word in the mage tongue, opening her hand into a flat palm, and a dot of hellfire bloomed above it.

"More than satisfactory," she said. "A princely gift, Your Dread Majesty."

"I reward loyalty, Warlock," Malicia smiled. "And sometimes even the anticipation of it."

The Named being spoken aloud earned a small shiver from Akua every time. She was not a claimant for it, not yet, but Creation was recognizing the... possibility. That the potential was there. Neither of them mentioned the spells Malicia's mages had hidden that would allow the empress to kill her with a word, though they both knew they were somewhere in the flesh. As always, the Dread Empress' words had two meanings: if loyalty earned reward, then disloyalty earned punishment. The mere anticipation of it would too, as Malicia had subtly warned.

"I've no doubt ours will be a close relationship, Your Dread Majesty," Akua lied.

"Oh, I agree," Malicia lied back.

The empress deigned to take a sip from her cup, some dark liquor cut with water.

"My decision to place trust in you is why I have decided to assign you to the Black Knight's command for the coming battle," Malicia continued. "Your unique insights into the adversary will be of great use, I am sure, but I most look forward to seeing your magic on display once more."

A transparent enough ploy, but that was on purpose: the empress was asserting control. As the first measure of that control, she wanted Akua to kill enough of the Army of Callow with sorcery that the bridge back to that side would be forever burned. There was not a ruler worth their salt on the continent that did not know Catherine Foundling loved her soldiers just as fiercely as they loved her.

"Of course," Akua replied, not batting an eye. "In that spirit, I would seek your permission to obtain artefacts from my cousin. The Sahelian arsenal is best put to your service, not left to gather dust."

"If he is amenable, I don't see why not," Malicia smiled.

A lie, Akua decided. The answer had been too smooth, too unthinking. Sargon must have already been given strict instructions about the calibre of what he was allowed to lend her. The empress feared she might be able to slip the leash too early, then. Interesting.

"My thanks," she said, bowing her head.

"Think nothing of it," the empress dismissed. "Are you confident, with such aid, of being able to match the Hierophant on the field?"

"It would depend on the amount of magic he first ingests with **Devour**," Akua said, feigning reluctance. "I have not seen his upper limit as a thaumatophage. Placing mage circles under my command or moving me to Marshal Nim's side early so that I might begin preparing rituals would increase my chances."

She liked Masego. He was a fascinating conversationalist and Akua had something of an inherited fondness for tactless mages. It had been marrying convenience to her own preference to lie about his abilities. With the Tower under the impression that he could simply suck dry entire battalion of mages if they were in sight, he'd be treated as an entity to be avoided instead of a Named that could be fought. And if Malicia's most sensible answer to this was placing greater power in the hands of another special asset – like an incipient Warlock, just for example – then was it not the best of both worlds? The Dread Empress studied her for a moment, then conceded with the slightest movement of the head.

"I will speak with my Black Knight," Malicia said, committing to nothing. "Expect to depart soon."

A moment passed.

"Great gifts bring the expectation of great results, Warlock," the empress added.

Meaning that should she be granted her request failure to match the Hierophant would have... consequences. Ah, how very old-fashioned of her. Akua found it rather charming.

"That is only natural," Akua easily replied.

The empress chuckled. It was a languorous sound, and though it had little effect on her Akua could appreciate the artistry as a



fellow seductress. Dread Empress Malicia was almost inhumanly beautiful, of course, but in truth that ran rather somewhat contrary to Akua's tastes. She had spent many years surrounded by the perfect and the splendid, eventually growing tired of the fare. She preferred character nowadays, the interestingly imperfect. The empress was simply too exquisite to qualify. Besides, women were rarely of interest to her. She could count on one hand the number she'd been attracted to. She caught the scent of smoke.

Looking down Akua saw her hand had closed into a fist, smothering the hellflame. She'd not even realized she'd done it. The growing pains of a new body, she told herself.

"I do enjoy conversing with you, Akua," Malicia lightly said. "They are always interesting, our little talks."

"I aim to please," she replied.

The empress smiled and Akua could feel the conversation was now to end. They had reached the end of their business for the day. And it was a whim, to ask, but she did not kill it when it rose. She had wondered from the moment she'd realized that work on the body awaiting her in the depths of the Empyrean Palace would have begun months before she ever set foot in Praes.

"How did you know?" Akua asked.

The Dread Empress of Praes studied her with dark eyes. Not a speck of gold in them. Blood as muddy as the land she'd been born of, running through the veins of the longest-reigning tyrant in the history of Praes.

"That I would turn on them," she said. "I did not, until the very end. How did you *know*?"

Dread Empress Malicia's smile was sad, she thought, and perhaps the sole genuine emotion she had shown this entire conversation.

"You came too late," the empress said. "Even if some loved you, and I expect they did. You came to them too late, Akua. They were never going to forgive you for what they might have forgiven each other. There was no becoming one of the five."

Her face went blank, like she was some kind of tipsy debutante. It was still better than the spasm of pain that would have shown on her face otherwise.

"In the end, darling, you were always going to come back," Malicia gently said. "This is the only home you have."

Sorcery rippled across the mirror, turning it back to simple polished silver, and Akua was left to wonder whether it had been

kindness or an assertion of power to end the spell on that sentence. Perhaps a little of both, she decided. Though the dark-skinned woman knew she could have risen to her feet and distracted herself with movement, with pouring herself a cup of wine from the carafe or biting into a pear – the sheer pleasure of proper *taste*, after all this time – she did not. Instead she sat there and closed her eyes, thinking while it was all still fresh.

She had just fooled the empress successfully for the first time, after days of being interrogated for every scrap of knowledge on the Army of Callow and the Grand Alliance that she cared to divulge, but it did not feel like much a victory. She would admit it had been enjoyable, sparring with the empress. Sharpening iron with iron, the two of them knowing a single misstep would be enough for the other to pounce. Yet now that it was over, looking at what had been done, it felt... childish. Gaudy. No, neither of those were exactly right. More like she'd been indulging in something particularly-

"Wasteful," Akua Sahelian murmured.

Scrapping iron for no real purpose save vanity. What had been gained from it all, really? They had circled each other like crocodiles snapping at each other's tails, a triumph only of showing teeth. If instead they had sat and spoken plainly for even an hour, understood where they differed and where they might concur, would it not have – *ah*, she thought. And there it was. That old Sahelian greed, whispering again in her ear: she had left the fire for the dark, but she wanted all the pleasures of both. Akua rose to her feet at last, drawing back the chair and gliding past the wine carafe. It was the long window at the back of the room she sought, great panes of glass that could be pushed open to pair a lazy evening breeze with the view. She leaned against the windowsill, enjoying to the touch of the wind on her face, and lost herself looking at the distant silhouettes of Zaman Ango. The ancient maze, the sloping pyramids of mud.

Malicia had been right, she thought. This was home. The warmth of the fire had lulled her into indolence, but she'd snapped out of it at last. She would not forget that moment in the cave, where it had at last sunk in that *nothing* would make a change. That Akua could turn on her family, on her people, on everything she believed in and had ever loved since she was a child, and still it *would not be enough*. Because her folly had been the doom of a city, of a hundred thousand souls, and while the Gods knew of forgiveness Catherine Foundling did not. Had that been the revenge, she'd wondered then? Making her... and then ripping away the curtain, leaving her to look a merciless truth in the eye.

Maybe it was. Dartwick had wounded more shallowly when she'd made her rip out the eye instead.

And the worst of it was that, even now, part of her ached to leave. To return. It would not go without comment, her absence, and yet Akua thought she might be able to talk her way out of the worst of it. And she'd still have the evenings spent designing wards with Masego, the drinks and lurid gossip with Indrani. Even those cautious, almost Praesi talks with Adjutant – who wanted to learn all she had to tell of the highborn of the Wasteland while giving back as little as he could for it. And another, of course, the one she'd left behind most of all.

Akua had thought to kill Catherine Foundling, once. To slay her and claim all she had built, perhaps even wearing her face. When she had still been a prisoner of the Mantle of Woe, sent back to the maddening boredom of nothingness in between brief tastes of Creation. Ah, but what *interesting* tastes they had been. Grandiose plans of war against half the continent, diplomacy with the most powerful people on Calernia. Then even more terrible sights, on the way to Keter. And even as she was dragged from wonder to wonder, there was the once-Squire in the middle of it all. Now a Black Queen, turned into everything Akua had thought she might become.

Fascination had been the doom of many a Sahelian.

"But it doesn't matter, does it?" Akua said to the wind.

There was no joy to chase at the end of that path. No long-awaited delight, nothing to suffer for. She would not be forgiven, and even a lifetime of saving strangers and helping fools would not see her redeemed in anyone's eyes. She had been chasing ghosts the entire time. So *why* stay? Why not come back to the home she had sold for *nothing*, to the destiny that had been taken from her? Warlock, yes, for that was Malicia's offer. But why stop there? Sargon wanted her to free him of the soulbox, and so she could use him to free this body from Malicia's yoke. Beyond the walls of Wolof, Praes was a cauldron about to tip over and in such chaos a clever woman could rise far. If she was to have a foot in the Tower, why not climb all the way to the top?

If none of it mattered, why should Akua Sahelian not get everything she deserved?

A voice she was learning to hate whispered that perhaps she already had. She ignored it. It was the voice of weakness, of the lion gone tame. She could see it in her mind's eye, the path up the stairs. It began with the Black Knight, Marshal Nim. The key to the Legions, not that Malicia seemed to have grasped that. Her only Black Knight before Nim had the loyalty of the Legions for having reformed them, but the bond ran deeper than that. Black Knights were the champions of the Tower, commander of armies and killers of heroes. There was a Role: Malicia had done more than simply name a new champion when she had recognized the ogre's claim. Should Marshal Nim prove less than utterly loyal, why, it

might just be that the armies of Praes would split between following the old Black Knight and the new.

Did that not simply reek of opportunity? Yes, she decided, it was the beginning of a plan. One that would allow her to sit on the sole throne in all of Praes, before all was said and done.

So why, Akua Sahelian wondered, was she not hearing the song?

—

Amadeus had always enjoyed looking at the Hungering Sands as night fell.

It was a pleasure to the eye, the way the sky turned to vivid purples and yellows with not a cloud in sight. The way the shadows lengthened among the dunes like slithering snakes. Even the coolness was pleasant, when wearing a cloak. That much had been a necessity, given that it was only feasible to meet the woman he'd come to see under some cover of darkness. He'd not seen her in at least fifteen years, by Amadeus' reckoning, but neither of them would forget the other. Lady Layan Kaishi had once been Commander Layan of the Third Legion, before she came to rule a prosperous little town at the outskirts of the Hungering Sands.

She'd lost an arm at the siege of Laure, and not in a manner where it might be replaced, but the Legions had not abandoned her. When she'd sought a discharge and returned home to settle accounts with her family, 'volunteer legionaries on leave' had accompanied her. Lord Kaisha had fallen down some stairs, as had his young wife – Layan's own age, he'd heard – whose luck in birthing a son possessing the Gift had first seen Layan given the choice of the Legions or the grave. Some of those legionaries had even returned after their terms were over, stayed on as household guards, and though the holdings of Lady Layan were not large or rich they were known to be orderly. It'd drawn people to her town, as safety always did in troubled times.

Layan had not forgotten whose help it was that'd seen her made a lady: when Amadeus had contacted her, she'd agreed to lend a hand without hesitation. It had not been an onerous favour he asked for, anyway, simply the use of one of her family mages for a scrying ritual. Sometimes the dark-haired man wondered if anyone aside from Eudokia really grasped the sheer number of veterans he'd settled across the breadth of Praes. Most of them were not lords or ladies, of course – a campaign to stack the nobility with his veterans would have caused rebellion – but he'd seen to their livelihoods. Appointments in the local bureaucracies, free land leases in the Green Stretch, cushy posts in city guards or advantageous trade permits.

The Legions of Terror had bled for him across a dozen fields. Amadeus would not let their legionaries tumble into destitution after they left the ranks. And now, in his own time on need, he had found many doors still open to him. It was not the same as when he had been able to call on the Eyes, when Eudokia and Ime had left no stone unturned and council unheard, but he'd learned he still had friends in many places. Not a net of them, but it was better that way. Ime would have been able to infiltrate an organized apparatus, but she could not track entire decades of friendships and loyalties forged through two wars. So long as Amadeus remained quick and careful, so long as he kept moving, the Eyes would stay one step behind. It'd be enough.

In most fights, one step's worth of distance was all that he needed.

Layan had aged gracefully, hair threaded with silver and skin wrinkled but staying fit in form. She'd come to him out in the sands with her mage, as the odds were good that there was at least one traitor in her keep, but when they met she had hesitated before clasping the arm he offered. Amadeus's lips quirked in amusement. She had not been the first of his veterans to react this way.

"The beard?" he teased.

"And the grey," Layan admitted. "Never thought I'd see you with either, sir. No offence."

"None taken," he said. "You'd be surprised how many reacted the same."

She snorted.

"With all due respect, sir, no I wouldn't," Layan said.

For all the levity, her eyes had sharpened when he'd mentioned others. She hesitated, then spoke again.

"Is it true?" Layan asked. "That out west you made a claim on the Tower?"

"Rumours fly far and swift, I see," Amadeus noted.

"Rashan up north was a captain in the Fifth," Lady Layan said. "His kid and one of mine are married. Lady Salah's husband, out in Jubar, he's the brother of the Second's last quartermaster. We talk, sir. And not just us. There's a lot who came home after the wars who're still around. And a lot of us who have kin in the Legions and the Army."

It still filled Amadeus with a rueful sort of pride, every time he heard the army raised by Istrid's daughter and his own spoken

of as a peer to the Legions he'd given so many years of his life to.

"I spoke words at the Peace of Salia," Amadeus said. "I stand by them still."

Layan Kaishi nodded, eyes hooded in the unfolding dark of the evening.

"There's a lot of us who'll come, if you call," she quietly said. "More than you know. Not just veterans and our families."

She hesitated.

"It can't go on like this, sir," Layan said. "This *chaos*. Ashur burns our coasts and now we play parlour games pretending they're allies?"

She spat to the side, into the sand.

"Fuck that," Layan cursed. "And whatever the Hells is happening with Sepulchral up north should have been stamped out years ago, not left to burn for whatever scheme this is. The empress is getting lost in her plots, sir. Doesn't matter she keeps winning, we're just *tired* of the games."

And in a way, Amadeus thought, those few sentences he'd just heard were the most damning a verdict passed on Alaya's reign he'd yet to hear. Because when the Tower was losing people like Layan, who was neither rebellious nor ambitious by nature, who most wanted out of a ruler competence and order, something had gone wrong. *Were you always like this, Alaya, and I simply never wanted to see it?* No, he did not believe that. They had lost perspective, over the years. He as much as she. They'd spent too long sitting on high seats, forgot what the view from the mud was like. Like all empires, like all rulers, they had reached their zenith and begun to decay. Old mistakes were yet in need of mending, and Amadeus of the Green Stretch would not relent until he had laid them all to rest.

That much he owed, to all and to himself.

"I am already a rebel, Layan," he faintly smiled.

"We can be too, if you want," his veteran boldly offered. "And there's enough of us we can get High Lady Takisha behind you if you toss her a few bones. It's not just us old hands who want an end to the messes. We've got support."

The High Lady of Kahtan would turn on him the very moment she felt she was in a position to claim the Tower for herself, of course. They both knew that without Layan needing to speak the words.

"Another banner raised won't end this," Amadeus gently declined. "But beyond your help tonight, there *is* something that can be done."

Layan Kaisha was almost seventy. She'd not been in the Legions of Terror for over twenty years. And still, the moment he finished that sentence, she snapped at attention like a cadet fresh off the College rolls. *Some things just stay with us, don't they?* he fondly thought. Amadeus understood. He, too, had never quite shaken the stray dog out of his bones. He still found it easier to bite than kneel.

"High Lady Takisha has gathered the nobles of the south to her court," he said. "Do not let them disperse. Take them north: Ater is where this all comes to a close."

Layan slowly nodded.

"So long as the Grey Eyries are rebelling and Old Wither's holed up in Foramen, many will balk at leaving the Sands," she said.

"The Tribes won't move," Amadeus said.

It was not a prediction or a promise. It was a statement of fact. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Are they- no, best you don't answer that," she decided. "They can't get out of me what I don't know."

It was rather heartwarming to see that the safety protocols Ranker had designed were still being kept to. Her contributions to the Reforms had been more discreet than his or Grem's, but no less crucial for it.

"I'll spread the word, sir," Layan said. "We should have enough pull for it."

And Alaya would want the nobles close, even if she lost the battle taking shape in the depths of the Wasteland. The starker her disarray, the closer she would want them to the Tower: troublesome as they would be in its shadow, it was nothing to the trouble they would make out of her reach. So even if the Eyes learned he had a hand in this, and they would, Alaya would allow it. She would trust in her mastery of the Court to triumph against whatever scheme he might have arranged.

"There'll be a battle, before it ends," Amadeus said, offering his arm to clasp.

"Then we'll meet again, sir," Layan smiled, taking it. "I still fit in my armour."

She cast a look around, glossing over the young mage she'd brought as he requested – he had long prepared the ritual,

needing only a word to begin – and casting about for another shadow in the gloom.

“I’d heard the Lady was with you,” she said, a question in her tone.

“Ranger’s out and about,” he smiled. “Checking to see if there are any rats.”

“I pity them if there are,” Layan muttered.

With one last glance they parted ways, Amadeus sliding down the side of the hill to speak to the mageling in neat robes awaiting by a simple scrying bowl laid atop a rock.

“I can begin at your pleasure, my lord,” the young man said. “Though the key you gave me is utter nonsense, so it ought to do nothing at all.”

“Then it will do nothing,” Amadeus serenely replied. “The spell, now.”

Though somewhat put out, the young sorcerer duly spoke the incantation and the spell shivered across the air. When the water’s surface rippled the mageling gaped in surprise. Amadeus’ cool stare shook him out of it, making the dismissal clear. He bowed, then ran off after his aunt into the sands. The green-eyed man passed a hand through his hair, which he decided was getting a little too long, and waited for the ripples to cease. It took nearly a quarter hour for it to happen, and only then did a face appear in the water. Deep-set yellow eyes and wrinkled skin that looked like brown-green leather swam into focus.

High Lady Wither of Foramen, formerly Matron of the High Ridge Tribe, looked highly irritated until she realized who it was she was looking at. Then her face went blank, mouth closing shut with a snap.

“Good evening, Wither,” Amadeus smiled, showing only the faintest slice of teeth. “It’s been some time, hasn’t it?”

The old goblin hissed in displeasure through her teeth, almost like a whistle. Obtaining the key to her private scrying bowl had not endeared him to her, evidently.

“Never long enough, Carrion Lord,” she said. “Come to threaten me into changing sides?”

“I usually threaten only people I intend to later kill regardless,” Amadeus noted. “Fear is a poor incentive for alliance. I suppose I could bluster a bit, if it will make you feel better about what is to follow.”

“And what’s that?” Wither mocked, flashing her teeth mockingly.



"I am going to tell you a story," Amadeus amiably said, "and you will then give me what I politely ask for."

"You're getting thick in your old age, Carrion Lord," Wither said. "My defences are fine enough Ranger didn't even try for my life when you two passed through Foramen. You have nothing to threaten me with, and any offer you make the Tower will double without batting an eye."

Ah, Wither. For all that she was the first Matron to truly enter the highest reach of Praesi politics, she'd yet to learn to think beyond the goblin conception of conflict. Amadeus had never attempted to lay a hand on the High Lady of Foramen because what he'd come for had been of much greater value than anything an assassination might bring about. The green-eyed man had promised his old acquaintance a story, however, and so he would tell it.

"After the fall of Summerholm, during the Conquest," Amadeus said, "it took less than six hours for the first rebel group to form."

Garrison soldiers and a hedge wizard that'd escaped the Fields of Streges, planning to go to ground until most of the Legions left the city and then strike out at the invasion's supply lines while the siege of Laure began. It had been a reasoned and practical plan, in Amadeus' opinion. He'd appreciated the professionalism of it. Unfortunately Wekesa had spared the mage on purpose at the Fields, marking him with a discreet tracking spell, so they'd all been executed after interrogation.

"Three more emerged the following day," he continued. "Even with Scribe personally overseeing the Eyes in the city, it quickly became clear that the situation was not tenable. Sooner or later we'd miss the cabals and the push against Laure would be endangered. Something needed to be done."

Some had suggested mass executions of former soldiers, but Amadeus had found that ill-advised. It would simply replace known possible insurgents with military training for thrice their number in grieving relatives inclined to methods of insurgency that were harder to put down. If not worse. Callowans had long proven that they were perfectly willing to torch their own towns and cities while invaders were in them, should they be pushed far enough.

"The grey's brought rambling with it," Wither snorted. "You're turning into a joke, Amadeus."

The dark-haired man's friendly smile did not waver.

"It occurred to me, then, that fighting the inevitable was pointless," he said. "There *would* be rebel cabals. This was not an issue, however, so long as they were *manageable* rebel cabals."

"So you started making your own rebel groups," Wither dismissed. "Where spies were in the ranks from the start. I know the tale, Carrion Lord. It's an old one – have you run out of cleverness, to be boasting of tricks decades old?"

"Ah," the Carrion Lord said. "So you *do* remember."

He cocked his head to the side.

"Why, then, did you old witches believe I wouldn't catch you out using the same trick?"

Wither's face went blank.

"Come now," Amadeus murmured. "Alaya never bothered to understand your people beyond the levers that could be used to move them, Wither, but I made a *study* of you. Did you really think I wouldn't figure out the Tribes have been making their own traitors for centuries?"

On the surface, the goblin custom of constant backstabbing and treachery was remarkably similar to broader Praesi philosophies: iron sharpening iron, echoes of jino-waza. But that was a surface resemblance only. Goblins always preferred taking from outsiders than each other. Competition was brutal within units – within a family, a tribe, within *the* Tribes – but unlike the governing philosophies of Praes the Tribes did have a concept of the 'common good' of their kind. They could and did sacrifice, if not for each other, then for the sake of their race. When the Goblin Rebellions became losing proposition, the Matrons always made the same decision: one or more turned traitor, the rest were butchered to appease the Tower.

There must always be someone in the Grey Eyries that Ater could deal with, else the talk might turn to annihilation instead of vassalage.

"You are grasping at straws," Wither dismissed, "your position has become des-"

"It was cleverly done," Amadeus honestly praised. "Whoever wins the war, wherever the balance of power lies, the Tribes will gain. Either Alaya keeps the Tower and you are confirmed the first High Lady of your kind, or the Grand Alliance prevails and the Confederation of the Grey Eyries is recognized as a sovereign nation by more than half the continent."

It had been, in that classically goblin way, a viciously executed gambit. Because whether it was Wither that was the face of goblinkind going forward or the Confederation, the 'loser' would have to be drowned in blood. The deception risked being found out otherwise, the truth that the Matrons had planned this entire

civil war of theirs from the start and that Wither was still very much one of them.

"You have nothing," Wither said. "Not a thimble of proof to back this, because it is complete *lunacy*."

"You played it too straight, Wither," Amadeus told her, not unkindly. "That is what gave you away. We came to Foramen and there was not a *single* secret line of communication between you and the Matrons."

He saw the realization sink into her, the way her large eyes narrowed in dismay. They had overcorrected in cutting off ties entirely. The Matrons *should* have been secretly negotiating with Wither if this was a genuine civil war. They'd wholly cut ties because they did not want the Eyes to catch them talking and figure out the entire affair was a ploy, which had been the very detail to confirm for Amadeus that it was all a ploy. Alaya would understand it too, if it was brought to her. Wither knew that.

And so she knew that Amadeus now had his fingers around a throat: hers and all the Tribes'.

"You sat on that for more than a year," Wither finally said. "You've not simply been wandering around drinking and fucking the Lady of the Lake."

Well, he'd not done *just* that.

"In the spirit of our understanding," Amadeus amiably said, "I would like to make polite requests of you."

"What is it you want, Carrion Lord?" Wither hissed. "You've turned the knife enough for a night."

"I would like you to refrain from sallies outside your territory."

"Fine," Wither said, with ill grace.

"I would like use of your smuggling routes into Ater."

She began to speak, but Amadeus raised a hand to interrupt her.

"I know the Matrons' own were closed, but also Alaya left you your own as a reward," he said. "Don't bother."

Wither grunted.

"Anything else?" she mocked.

"Oh, just one last thing," Amadeus nonchalantly said.

The friendly smile turned thin and blade-like.

"I would like every last drop of goblinfire in possession of the Tribes."

## Chapter 12: String

*"There are three decisions that can only be mistakes: trusting a peace in the Free Cities, intervening in an Alamans succession and campaigning in the Wasteland."*

*– Queen Matilda the Elder of Callow*

It was General Sacker I'd wanted to talk to, as her informal patroness, but instead I found all three of the leaders of the Rebel Legions sitting on the other side of the scrying bowl.

That made an amusingly odd trio to look at, I must admit. Sacker was still the same old sack of wrinkles that looked deceptively half asleep, but General Mok was even larger than Hune had been on top of having half his face severely burned with spellfire. The difference in size between them somehow made the last of three stand out even more: General Jaiyana Seket of the Second Legion, a dark-haired and grey-eyed Taghreb in her late fifties. She'd been the only general already in the Wasteland to desert Malicia after the empress pulled her mind control trick a few years back. Only a little over half her legion had followed her, though, the rest sticking with the Tower.

That made the junior of the three generals in their informal hierarchy, considering that Sacker had filled her legion's depleted ranks from deserters and the Jacks had reported that Mok's own Third Legion now fielded six thousand soldiers instead of the standard four. Being the one with the relationship with Callow – and therefore its forges and foodstuffs – had put Sacker more or less on equal footing with Mok, however, so it wasn't quite as straightforward a balance of power as one might think. General Seket tended to be the kingmaker in contested decisions, after all, which was a form of influence as well. It'd all worked out as being surprisingly communal for a military hierarchy, no one making a push for primacy.

Which unfortunately meant that I wasn't negotiating with one person but three.

"I understand that the Grand Alliance has interests in Praes," General Mok said, voice rumbling, "but it doesn't get to impose terms here. Who rules in Ater is not to be determined in Salia or Laure."

I wasn't sure whether not mentioning Levante – the Dominion's capital – reflected good intel about the fate of the Pilgrim's Blood or simple dismissal of Levant, but either way he wasn't

wrong. These days the Blood wasn't agreeing on much of anything, except fighting the war to the end.

"That ship sailed the moment Malicia began actively warring on us through proxies and attacking our diplomatic efforts," I curtly replied. "She is, even now, the ally of the *Dead King*. Sovereignty's all well and good, but it doesn't buy you the rest of the world pretending nothing's happened when you piss on the common table."

General Seket looked amused at the turn of phrase – not a noble flower, this one, but a former bandit who'd chosen the Legions over the noose – and Sacker continued looking at me through those half-lidded eyes. Mok was getting angrier, though. I got the impression that out of them he most believed in the Dread Empire that'd been sold to the Legions after the Reforms: a place of order and rough fairness, where peoples that'd once been left out in the cold were slowly brought into the fold instead. It'd been the mind control he objected to on a fundamental level, not necessarily Malicia calling the Rebel Legions to heel. Sacker stepped in before Mok could speak again, perhaps sensing my irritation with the ogre was rising. I had little patience for people who let their ideals get in the way of looking at what was actually happening around them.

"No one is denying that you have a right to retaliate for attacks on the Grand Alliance," Sacker said. "Our concern is that it seems few of the decisions relating to the empire's future will be made by Praesi."

"That Malicia has to go isn't even something even worth arguing about," I bluntly replied. "I will cheerfully massacre anything and anyone who gets in the way of that. If your issues are with the details of Malicia's *succession*, however, then we have a lot more room for compromise."

"We did not leave the empress' service to now defend her," General Seket said. "The matter my colleagues are tiptoeing around is different: to be frank, none of us want to raise a sword to win Dread Empress Foundling the Tower."

I almost laughed in their faces, fighting that down to a snort with great effort.

"If that's your worry, then we have no issue," I said. "I have no interest whatsoever in climbing the Tower."

"Akua Sahelian would not be a more acceptable candidate," General Mok plainly said.

Huh. First Sargon had guessed that, now the Rebel Legions. The High Lord of Wolof I could forgive, but some of these people had served in Callow over the years. Did none of them realize that if

I were known to have backed the Doom of Liesse for rule over the Wasteland I'd get strung up in the streets by my own people? It wasn't like the Folly was some old wound barely remembered. Almost everyone in Callow had lost at least a distant relative when a city the size of Liesse got murdered.

"I've no interest in backing her claim either, assuming she makes one," I replied just as plainly. "If I am to support anyone's claim, it will be that of Amadeus of the Green Stretch."

"You have been talking with Sepulchral for years," Sacker pointed out.

"And we already discussed all *this* years ago," I waspishly replied. "Why are we revisiting these grounds now?"

"Years ago you were not leading an army invading Praes," General Mok replied. "We require different assurances now that battle is on the horizon."

A little rich to say that, considering that they were at least three weeks behind Sepulchral's army on the march and she was herself at least a week behind Marshal Nim. Maybe closer to two.

"I'm not interested in putting Abreha Mirembe on the throne," I explicitly spelled out. "I see no need to make war on her, however, and she was a convenient ally against Malicia. Should she surrender to whoever claims the Tower peacefully I'll even argue for leniency on her behalf."

I actually believe she might take that deal, and so did Scribe. Sepulchral had rebelled because Malicia had cornered her, not because she'd intended to make a play for the Tower. That attack from Malicia had come because High Lady Abreha had been muscling in on the empress in the first place, of course, but that was Praesi politics for you. It was Malicia that Sepulchral couldn't afford to surrender to, she wouldn't be so constrained if someone else held the Tower. And someone who hadn't been rebelled against could afford to offer her amnesty without taking a major hit to their reputation with the nobility. Looking closely at the three, I could see that General Seket was leaning the way of taking the bargain I'd offered: joining our armies to defeat the Loyalist Legions together, guaranteeing them a seat at the table in the aftermath. Mok was still very much against, and Sacker hard to read as she'd ever been.

"I cannot agree to putting imperial forces under the authority of a foreign nation," General Mok finally said. "Not even in this manner."

Sacker did not contradict him, a silence that rang loudly. I eyed the three of them coolly.

"Then it's my turn to ask questions," I said. "If not to reinforce my expedition, why is your army marching north?"

"You are not owed an answer," the ogre general flatly replied.

"You weren't owed food and steel," I sharply said. "You still got it. Careful about what bridges you burn, Mok. There are no second chances at this game."

"No offence was meant, I'm sure," General Seket intervened. "We set out to march, Queen Catherine, because if we do not the civil war will end without our having ever raised a sword."

I eyed her, distinctly unimpressed.

"So you're either foolish enough to march an army without a campaign plan or baldly opportunistic enough to want to sit out the fight and leverage your numbers for concessions afterwards," I said. "Which is it?"

"You put a hard slant on trying to avoid *fratricide*, Black Queen," Sacker curtly replied. "You blame us for not being eager to fight legions still filled with friends and kin, comrades we have fought with for decades. With the situation on the knife's edge, we will first attempt diplomacy."

My fingers clenched, then unclenched. I did not like the sound of that.

"Elaborate," I said.

"We will speak directly with the Black Knight," General Mok said. "And offer simple terms: should Dread Empress Malicia abdicate, we will return to the fold and crush Sepulchral together."

"Malicia will never take that deal," I replied without batting an eye. "Or if she does, it'll be as a trick to get you to dispose of her enemy before getting around to you."

"It's not her we're offering the deal to," General Seket said. "Nim is as good as her word. If the last legions turn on the Tower, Malicia will *have* to abdicate. All she has left in Ater are the First and the Fourth, which went skeletal from desertions."

"And should the Black Knight refuse you?" I asked.

"She won't," Mok confidently said.

Ah, so that was it. Sacker genuinely had been on the fence, I just hadn't offered enough to convince her. Mok had been against our armies joining from the start, though, because he'd already had a plan that was more palatable to him: cutting a deal with Marshal Nim.

"But if she does?" I pressed.

"Then you get your way, Black Queen," General Sacker said, showing pale needle-like teeth. "Long live Dread Emperor Amadeus. In the defence of his cause, we will seek friendship with the same Grand Alliance that recognized him in Salia."

I drummed my fingers on the table. The tremor had the water rippling, their faces rippling with it. And with that easy questions settled there was only one left to ask.

"And if the Black Knight does takes your deal," I asked, "where would that leave us?"

"The Legions of Terror are the sword and shield of Praes," General Seket said, tone conciliating, "but it doesn't need to come to blows between us."

"What it means is that there'll be no more talk of you *dictating* anything, Queen of Callow," General Mok rumbled.

*Huh*, I thought. This might just be the first time I'd been the hand that fed instead of the biter.

I wasn't enjoying the change of pace.

—

There was need of a fresh war council after that. Yet I found that, in practice, learning that there was a chance the Rebel Legions might turn on us did not affect our plans much.

"Being generous," Juniper said, "the rebels are a month behind the battle unless either we or Marshal Nim start wasting time. It'll be settled by the time they get there."

"If they can take the Twilight Ways they could cut ahead of Sepulchral, at least," I pointed out.

Dread Empress Sepulchral's army could not practically use the Ways, according to our spies. Some of its mages could access them, but they couldn't yet make stable portals. The Rebel Legions were another story. I glanced at Vivienne questioningly, getting an uncertain palm wiggle.

"The Jacks aren't sure either way," she said. "They have enough mages in the ranks for it to be possible, but it's not knowledge that grows on trees. I'd tend to err on the side of caution and assume they have *some* capacity with the Ways but not enough for their entire army."

"That could still be trouble," Grandmaster Talbot said. "Should we defeat the Black Knight in battle only for her to retreat in good order, a sudden swell of reinforcements could tip the



balance against us. How large are their numbers, now that they're finally marching?"

"Thirteen thousand legionaries," I said. "They should have little to no goblin munitions, at least, unlike the Loyalist Legions."

For the same reason the Army of Callow had finally filled its own stocks: I'd bought theirs.

"I do not understand this hesitation on your parts," Lady Aquiline admitted. "We are yet sixteen thousand, or close, and the Black Knight commands only twenty-three thousand soldiers. I have seen the Army of Callow triumph against steeper odds than this."

"You haven't," Juniper bluntly informed her. "You've seen us beat inferior or borderline peer armies, Lady Aquiline. You have never seen us fight a force that is at least our equal and possibly our superior."

She wasn't wrong, even if she was being pessimistic. We did have *some* advantages going for us. There were five legions marching with the Black Knight – the Eight, the Eleventh, the Thirteen, the Fourteenth and Nim's own Seventh – but the Legions of Terror didn't typically field cavalry. The Thirteenth did, having been raised from Callowan bandits and rebels, but only six hundred horsemen or so. The vast majority of Nim's three thousand and change cavalry was auxiliaries. Taghreb and Soninke light horse sent by nobles, which my Order of the Broken Bells could shred if they engaged in melee. My entire army was made up of veterans, while the Legions would have fresher recruits, and we also had a decisive Named advantage.

On the other hand, the officer corps of the Legions would be flatly better than ours and we'd be down on mage firepower as well as general numbers. It was still very much a winnable battle, in my opinion, but there would be no repeat of the Third at Sarcella or the ridiculous odds against undead my soldiers had frequently taken on. We were facing the same army that'd held the Vales against the greater strength of Procer, and I had no reason to believe it'd lost a step since then. Throwing another thirteen thousand veteran infantry down on the Black Knight's side of the scale would make for... hard odds, to say the least. At a minimum, it'd take field battles off the table.

To minimize the risks, we had to finish it before the Rebel Legions got there.

"Perhaps we should seek allies," Lord Razin suggested. "Would Dread Empress Sepulchral not be amenable to helping us against her rival?"

"It was my instinct as well," I told him, "but she's broken off talks with us. At our best guess, she's hoping we'll clash with the Black Knight before she gets there and she can pick off the weakened Loyalist Legions."

It would have been damned useful to string Abreha Mirembé along, but the trouble when dealing with people who'd survived at the top of the Wasteland for decades was that they tended to be rather hard to fool. Sepulchral had correctly assessed I wasn't going to help put her on the throne, so she'd decided to use me to weaken her enemy and finish climbing the Tower on her own. Odds were she figured I wouldn't actually fight a war to keep her off the throne, especially if I'd first taken losses casting Malicia down from it. To my distaste, she was fairly accurate in that judgement. I didn't want to march west again until my father held the Tower, but if Sepulchral dug in and offered good terms I might not have a choice.

How large a portion of Procer was I willing to sacrifice to get my chosen candidate on the throne? Abreha wasn't just a cutthroat snake: she was an *old* cutthroat snake. In Praes those were rare for a reason. She knew how to survive when the storms came calling.

"That's another twenty thousand we have no certainties about," Aisha noted. "We need to have a good grasp on the pace those force march at at before engaging, else we will be taking risks."

"Half of Sepulchral's army is levies that'll break under steady munitions fire," Juniper grunted. "But the other half is dangerous enough, I'll grant."

Like my Marshal of Callow, I could admit that I wasn't worried about fighting Sepulchral's army on the field. She had a little over six thousand household troops, which would be tough customers as that breed always was, but we had twice her horse in better quality. The thousand wavemen her allies in Nok had sent might be some trouble, true. They were supposed to be the finest archers in Praes, using great horn bows and honing their trade defending the ships of the House of Sahel. We were fighting the former High Lady of Aksum so naturally there'd be monsters too. It was what the city was famous for. But after having faced the Hidden Horror's own menagerie of nightmares, I did not expect Aksum's to impress me much.

"Unless the enemy tempo changes, it looks like our best shot at solving this cleanly remains a decisive victory against Marshal Nim," I finally said.

If we forced the Black Knight's army to surrender, the Rebel Legions would sink back into irrelevance. And Sepulchral couldn't take a swing at us lightly: it'd put her at war against the Grand Alliance. Much more likely she'd march straight on Ater instead,

and I had no real issue with that. I was skeptical she'd be able to take the City of Gates, but more than willing for her to soften up the capital some before the Army of Callow took a crack at it.

"Agreed," the Hellhound replied. "I'll want reports from the Jacks about the pace of every army to ensure we give battle with the best margin possible, but in around three weeks seems to be that window of opportunity."

I nodded in agreement.

"Well," I said, "council's done, it seems. Get your affairs in order, ladies and gentlemen, because come dawn we begin our march south."

—

Even in Hakram's absence his phalanges were functioning like a well-oiled machine.

That left me in the odd position of, well, not actually having anything to do. It would be a week at least before I next spoke to Cordelia Hasenbach, Indrani was spending the evening with Masego and Vivienne was busy twisting arms and making promises through the Observatory to secure names for a plan she'd come up with that might kneecap the Black Knight in the field. Feeling restless, I took to the night and the dirt streets of our camp. Whenever I stopped moving it felt like I was losing ground: even when I stayed still, the world kept moving around me. The first act of my Praesi campaign had been an unequivocal victory, for all that Malicia and her Black Knight had scored blood of their own, but from now on things would get... complicated.

The number of moving pieces had increased and this wouldn't be the Graveyard all over again. I wouldn't be able to predict the whole array of leadership I was fighting the way I'd been able to read the Tyrant, Pilgrim and First Prince. Too many people, not enough of them Named. Legions rebel and loyalist, Sepulchral's would-be army of conquest and hidden behind them all whatever my father's scheme for this fight would be. I knew better than to believe he wouldn't be putting a finger on the scale of the battle that would determine the fate of Praes for the coming decades. That he had yet to truly come out of the woodworks worried me more than I cared to admit. He wasn't proud, as a man, at least not in ways that got in the way of him achieving his goals.

So if he'd not reached out to me, made common cause, it was because some of our objectives were at odds. I was not so arrogant as to pretend that the prospect of the fighting the man who'd taught me did not inspire in me a... healthy amount of caution.

The sound of steel on steel drew my attention as I drifted close to drilling grounds. There shouldn't be any legionaries out at this hour, and a few steps confirmed there weren't. The two people moving swiftly back and forth across the dusty ground weren't my soldiers. The Silver Huntress deftly flicked her spear, barbed tip tickling at the Squire's shield, and as Arthur Foundling took a cautious step back she circled around him to probe his flank. I approached quietly, laying my staff against the side of the fence before resting my elbows atop it. The Squire was being careful, keeping his shield up and only venturing out of his shell to try to rush her and leverage his advantage close up, but on open grounds like this the tactic was a mistake.

I winced as I saw him try a charge, banking on the Huntress being slow to retreat her spear after a feint, only to find out that Alexis was quite light-footed at maintaining their distance. She feinted his leg, then darted back up to slap the side of his helm hard when he lowered his shield to cover himself. The boy winced at the pain but did not complain. As well he shouldn't: if that blow had come from someone out to kill him, it would have gone right through his throat instead. If Arthur was to ever score a blow, I thought, he needed to pressure her from the start. Push forward steadily, learn to tell apart the feints from the real attacks and close the distance while she was committed to striking him.

I watched in silence as the two continued to move across the dust, the Mantle of Woe's hood warm over my head, and to my pleased surprise I saw that the Squire was learning. No more bull rushing out of him, though he wasted a lot of time trying to figure out how to parry a spear with a sword. You couldn't, really, not reliably. From Named to not, sure, but not between peer opponents. The Huntress worked him through a pretty straightforward sequence – shield edges the spear to the side, sword lunge for the throat as you dart forward – and he began trying it out. He took to it quickly. Unnaturally quickly, really, I decided as my brow rose.

His reflexes weren't getting sharper or his footing more flexible, but with every try he moved a little faster through the sequence. A little smoother. By the eighth attempt his execution was impressive enough I would have thought he'd spent months drilling it. *Name*, I thought. *Has to be*. The spar ended after Arthur finally scored a blow on the Silver Huntress' breastplate, though I suspected she'd actually allow him to land it. He was a quick lad, but Alexis the Argent was Indrani's superior in close combat. The two of them seemed surprised when they noticed I was there. Night was a friend to me in all sorts of ways. I clapped politely, to the older heroine's amusement, but Arthur looked embarrassed.

They had water and cloths on a stone near the fence, so when they came to quench their thirst and get ride of the worst of the sweat it was only natural that we chat a bit.

"I'm rather ashamed you saw that, Your Majesty," Arthur said. "I have been meaning to expand my experience fighting Named, but it is slow going."

"In terms of pure swordsmanship you're actually better than I was at your age," I noted. "Not as good as the Lone Swordsman was, maybe, but there's a reason I relied on tricks to kill the man."

"It's empty whining on his part," the Huntress scoffed. "He improves daily. The Lady's the only person I've ever seen pick up drills that fast."

"The Ranger?" Arthur breathed out. "That's... I've always admired what I heard of her in stories, truth be told."

Oh dear. I shared a look with Alexis, the two of us silently agreeing it would be for the best if he never met the woman in question. The Silver Huntress had a much harsher opinion of the Lady of the Lake than Archer. I'd learned as much because she was not shy in expressing it even to strangers. It'd made for pleasant common ground over the months of campaigning. Still, I couldn't let myself get distracted by this little detour. I'd had a nugget of information I wanted to dig for.

"Were you always this quick to catch on?" I casually asked. "It seems like the sort of thing the Order would have reported on."

He ruefully smiled.

"No," Arthur admitted. "It was after the fight with the puppet of the Black Knight, Your Majesty. The way it handled Sapan and I, then the way you stepped in and took care of it..."

His gauntlets clenched tight around his sword.

"I had believed myself a fine blade, but after that I couldn't deny I stillhave so much to **Learn**," the Squire said.

Ah, an old friend had returned. Was he leaning on that to improve his fighting? I'd not been able to do the same, back when I had the same aspect. Fighting had been the one thing it *didn't* help me with.

"Aspect," I noted, seeing no point in further subtlety. "Have you seen the same kind of leap forward in your studies?"

He looked baffled.

"No," he said. "Should I have?"

I hummed, shaking my head.

"It's somewhat reassuring that you did not," I said. "There's a balance to these things, Squire."

The Silver Huntress grunted in agreement.

"No power comes without a hook," Alexis the Argent said. "Beware of anything that pretends otherwise."

Still, the Gods Above liked their nasty surprises, didn't they? The Squire had gotten a flavour of the aspect attuned to martial pursuits after a defeat against the Black Knight, while being guaranteed weeks if not months of a relatively safe environment filled with veteran Named to train with. By the time Nim encountered the boy again for the continuation of their pattern, he was going to be a regular fucking monster. In an abstract sense my sympathies lay with Marshal Nim, because this all felt very much like the Heavens hooking an Evil fish and reeling her in, but in a practical sense our little Squire had my backing to the hilt. I'd put Indrani on training him too, maybe see if the Barrow Sword was amenable to pitching in.

"I know to be wary of shortcuts," Arthur promised, then sent me an almost shy look. "Perhaps we may spar one day, Your Majesty? Many consider you among the finest swords in Callow."

"My tricks are best kept up my sleeve," I drily said. "We'll see about getting you a few sessions with Archer, though. She tends to be my better close up."

The boy did not quite manage to hide his disappointment but I quashed the pang I felt at the sight. I already walked the line perhaps a little too finely when it came to teaching Arthur Foundling. An occasional distant instructor tossing a few lessons his way shouldn't be too prone to ending up story fodder, I figured, but considering he had a draw with the Black Knight coming up the last thing I wanted was stepping into a formal teacher's role. That was a good way to stumble into buying his draw with my death. The Squire retired after chatting a little longer, but to my surprise the Silver Huntress did not. Had I offended her by mentioning Indrani training someone she was already training?

No, I decided, looking at her tense face. That wasn't the tension of someone keeping a lid on their anger but the gritted teeth of someone forcing themselves to venture into uncomfortable grounds.

"I want to talk," Alexis the Argent said, then bit her cheek. "Please."

My hand found the staff of dead yew never too far from my hand, closing around the rough wood. I'd gotten used to the contrast

between the Huntress' startlingly girlish high-pitched voice and her rough appearance – broken nose and plain face, the messy bun of red hair and calloused hands – but I'd noticed she tended to speak slowly and curtly to take the edge off it. No doubt she'd been mercilessly mocked for the contrast as a child: it was the kind of thing even my fellow orphanage girls would have narrowed in on, much less children as skilled at cruelty as the Refuge kids had been. This time, though, the curtness was not an affection on her part. She was fighting the words as they came out.

I couldn't think of many things I had a hand in that'd get this much emotion out of her.

"I'm listening," I said.

Her lips pressed tight, like she was trying to clench them.

"The Lady's in Praes," she said. "With the Carrion Lord. Your spies said so."

I nodded.

"You think we're going to fight her?" the Huntress asked.

"I'd prefer not to," I admitted. "But I don't think she's going to give us a choice."

At some point, my father and I would clash. His continued silence spoke to that. And when that moment came, I did not believe it would be armies that marched. It would be a war of knives, not battalions, and the Ranger was the finest knife at his disposal. On my end of things, it was not a coincidence that all the surviving children of Refuge were with my host. I had planned for this eventuality in my own way.

"She won't," Alexis roughly said. "That's not how she..."

She hesitated, stumbling over words before abandoning the sentence entirely.

"I hate her," the Silver Huntress candidly admitted. "I honestly do. But I won't lie. She didn't think she was being cruel when she worked us. She thought she was toughening us up for the real world, so we could live like she does."

"But you don't buy that," I murmured.

"We came out of Refuge fine killers, Black Queen," Alexis said. "For that I'm thankful. But she was also trying to make us all into these... she has this idea, this ideal, of 'full' persons that need no one else. That bind with others only because they want to, not because they ever *need* to."

She spat to the side.

"And that fucked us," the Huntress bluntly said. "Cocky still hasn't told a living soul her name. John got himself killed because he thought he thought he needed to prove he was our equal. Lysander once spent most a year learning how to make shoes, when we were kids, because he thought just buying them would mean he was weak."

I watched her silently, waiting for the last two names. Named. The last of the band of five that had never formed.

"I fight when I shouldn't," Alexis the Argent reluctantly admitted. "Because it feels like backing down if I don't. But Indrani's the worst off, because of all of us she's the one that *bought* into it."

"I think the woman you knew," I gently said, "only shares so much with the woman I know."

She didn't like that.

"I know," the Huntress bit out angrily, slamming a fist on the groaning fence. "I know, *fuck*."

I let it go, this once, but my eye narrowed. It did not go unnoticed.

"She's not the same as she was when she left to pick up John," Alexis forced out. "She tries. I can see it, Black Queen, that sometimes the urge is there but she fucking bites down on it."

"You don't have to forgive her," I quietly said. "She's not owed that."

The Silver Huntress faintly smiled.

"Sometimes I still wonder if Lysander got killed because Indrani went *soft* from her years with the Woe," she confessed. "Whether it'd have gone down different, if she'd not turned into the kind of person who tries."

Sometimes, looking at what Ranger had left in the children she'd raised, I wondered what it was Amadeus of the Green Stretch had left in me. What curse, what scar. That there would be one I had no doubt: one did not learn from a madman without learning some manner of madness with it.

"She got to us deep, the Lady," Alexis tiredly said. "Even where we think she didn't. But maybe that's what we have – scars from the same fang. That's for us to handle, anyway. It's not what I came to you for."

"Then what *did* you come for?" I asked.



"When Ranger comes for us, and she will," Alexis the Argent said, voice eerily calm, "she'll strike at every weakness. As hard as she can. She'll try to break us."

My fingers clenched.

"It's how she believes love works, I think," the Huntress quietly said. "To make someone stronger, even if it hurts them. So she will come for us, Catherine Foundling, with loving cruelty. To crown us, welcome us as women. Peers."

Peers, the way she'd treated the Calamities in my Name dreams as the Squire. The way she treated those, I thought, that had not needed her hand to come into strength. There were people, I thought, that Ranger might be lovely to. My father was one of them, because there were things about him she admired. It excused none of it, as far as I was concerned.

"She is not *my* peer," I coldly said. "And I'll teach her why, should she come for any of you."

"I can take care of myself," Alexis brusquely dismissed. "But Indrani..."

The Silver Huntress bit her lip.

"That's what I want from you, Black Queen," she finally said. "Don't let the Lady turn her back into who she used to be. That's all I ask."

A moment, as she choked on the word.

*"Please."*

The moon glared down at us, a full circle wreathing us both in pale.

"I won't," I swore.

## Chapter 13: Footing

*"To hold a strong defensive position is not enough. You must force the enemy to attack it, which is the difference between tactics and strategy."*

– Extract from 'Considerations on Warfare' by Marshal Grem One-Eye

We made good pace.

The Army of Callow had been hammered into a host that could move on the quick by years of campaigning abroad, and for once we weren't too starved on trained officers: the combination of the

First and Second Army that Juniper commanded had benefitted from the officer pools being combined. It'd be Hells to split the armies back up when it was done, of course, but that was a problem for the future. There simply weren't enough potential soldiers left back in Callow for the First and Second to be raised back up to full strength separately anyway, they'd be staying combined until the end of the war. The 'Fifth' Army, as the rank and file had taken to calling it, wasn't going anywhere for some years.

The Levantines under Razin and Aquiline weren't a drag on our pace, the way they'd sometimes been in Hainaut. Now that they were relying on our supply train instead of their own, the Dominion warriors were as cut free from a tether: they were usually *quicker* on the march than my legionaries now. The lighter armour and years of raiding had trained it into them. The Twilight Ways made for a pleasant reprieve from Wasteland weather, even if we'd only ever tasted the outskirts of that, and we advanced faster than Juniper had anticipated. We had to slow down around the end of the first week, waiting for reports about the march of the other armies.

Marshal Nim and her legions kept to the same brisk pace they had so far, which meant in about two weeks both our armies would be forced to emerge from the Ways or face the possibility of a contested crossing should we be beaten to returning to Creation. The surprising part was that Dread Empress Sepulchral seemed to have been gaining on the Black Knight: she was in hot pursuit, still a week behind even though the Legions were using the Ways and she was not. It seemed impossible, and the Jacks confirmed there was more to it a few days later. It was not Sepulchral's entire army that'd been keeping up that breakneck pace but instead a large vanguard.

Two thousand household troops and her entire cavalry contingent, Vivienne's people believed.

"She's trying to keep up the pressure on Marshal Nim by having a force nipping at her rear," Juniper opined. "They won't engage, but they'll raid her supply lines and try to hammer any detachment she splits from her main host."

"If the Jacks have people in Sepulchral's camp able to learn this, the Eyes will too," Vivienne noted. "I have no doubt Malicia informed her Black Knight of the plan before it even began."

I snorted.

"Old Abreha's counting on it," I said, reluctantly admiring. "She's trying to goad the Black Knight into engaging us hastily."

Sepulchral had nothing but gains to make from the Loyalist Legions and the Army of Callow getting into a messy, ill-planned battle.

"It's cleverly done," Juniper admitted. "If Nim sends a force south to make the vanguard back off, she has to either leave it there – and weaken herself just before she fights us – or slow her march so it can rejoin. Which would buy time for the slower part of Sepulchral's army to catch up."

I shared a look with my marshal. It was an inspired tactic, playing to the strengths of her army and the weaknesses of the Black Knight's positions. It was, in other words, not a tactic that Abreha Mirembé or her generals had likely come up with. Sepulchral was a skilling intriguer but a solidly average battle commander, looking at her record. And as far as we knew neither Aksum nor Nok had any noteworthy military talents in their upper ranks. So who was planning Sepulchral's campaign for her? I glanced at Scribe, who had been silently keeping notes as we spoke.

"Make it a priority to find out who's been giving out those orders," I ordered her. "The last thing we need is for Sepulchral to become a genuine threat."

"Ime has been concentrating on putting out the last gasps of my influence in the Wasteland," Eudokia said. "It might be possible to find this out, Queen Catherine, but I will have to burn most of the agents I have in Sepulchral's camp."

Meaning she would no longer be confident of catching anything going on there afterwards. We'd be relying solely on the Jacks, and Vivienne's spies had been playing catch-up with the Eyes since the moment they were first raised without ever quite touching that prize. I hesitated, then turned to Juniper.

"How confident are you of beating that army if you know who commands it?" I asked.

She did not answer immediately, considering the question seriously.

"Seven parts in ten," Juniper of the Red Shields finally said.

I nodded. Good enough for me.

"Do it," I ordered Scribe.

Aside from that little surprise, the beginning of our southern offensive was trotting along nicely. As the second week since we'd left the outskirts of Wolof began, it looked like as if our preferred outcome would come to pass: a decisive pitched battle with the Loyalist Legions at least a week before anyone else was

close enough to intervene. There'd been no real hiccup to our advance so far, which only made it natural that Creation would then promptly snatch the ground out from under our feet. Unlike some of the past instances of the Gods pissing in my morning gruel, however, this time the snatching was not a fucking metaphor.

Half-past Morning Bell, as we marched along the Twilight Ways, the ground *literally* fell out under my army.

Great cracks spread across the ground, fast enough my officers had time to do little more than shout warnings, then great chunks of the Ways fell down into Creation like shattered glass panes. It was all the more hellish for the suddenness of it: there'd been no warning, not ominous sign. In thirty heartbeats my army had turned from a smoothly marching column into a groaning and wounded beast, spread out in chunks in the middle of a particularly vicious Wasteland dust storm. There was enough order in my ranks that I managed to rustle up two mage lines and Hierophant to form a shaky protective ward around the column, keeping the whipping dust out of our faces long enough that priests from the House Insurgent could begin seeing to the wounded and dying.

I ran around trying to get proper wardstones in place, hindered by the fact that they'd been built to protect the shape of camps and not columns, but before I got anywhere the storm suddenly died. It'd lasted perhaps half an hour after my army fell, and just as suddenly as it had come it was gone. Clenching my teeth, I got to finding out the damage. It'd been a short fall down, at least. That'd taken off the edge some. Hardly more than four feet in most cases, and the Order of the Broken Bells had been in the vanguard ahead of the fall so it'd mostly been remounts that'd broken their legs falling.

The grassy grounds from the Ways that'd fallen with us began to decay quickly and the emanations were somewhat toxic so we had to move away and reform, but order was getting restored as lieutenants saw to their lines. Numbers for casualties and wounded quickly made it up the chain, eventually getting to Juniper and myself: only seventy-nine dead, but almost three hundred wounded. We'd also lost enough horses for the Order that their staying power was compromised for longer-term engagements. Not necessarily an immediate concern, but by the time we got to Ater any knight who lost a horse would be fighting the rest of the campaign on foot.

There'd been more painful damage in a strategic sense.

"We're paralyzed for at least two days," Juniper bluntly said. "That we still have *any* supply wagons capable of moving is a miracle, and if the healers can't fix the oxen pulling them we're going to have to kill the beasts."

Which would further slow us, for all that it'd add to our meat reserves. We could compensate by putting the Order's remaining remounts to work pulling the wagons and arranging relays of legionaries – mostly orcs, given their greater body strength – but it'd still be a blow to mobility. Hopefully our healers could salvage at least some of the beasts of burden while our sappers repaired the broken supply wagons. The only silver lining was that Pickler's obsessive care for her field engines meant they'd been insulated from shock well enough the fall had caused need only for minor repairs and replacements. We wouldn't be headed into battle with the Legions of Terror without working war engines.

"We need to find out where we are," I sighed. "And if returning to the Ways will just see this happen again."

I'd already asked Masego to look into it. Wasteland weather was infamously dangerous for good reason, but ripping an army out of the Twilight Ways was going too far. My instincts screamed enemy action, but *which* enemy?

"I've sent out scouts," Juniper said. "I'll send someone to fetch you when they begin coming back."

"I'll see what Hierophant has for me, then," I said, groaning as I got back to my feet.

I'd almost lost Zombie the Sixth to this mess. He'd broken a leg and bucked me off, but the priests seemed to think he could be made better. I'd be stuck borrowing a mount from the Order until he was fit to ride again, though. Masego wasn't hard to find, considering he was still exactly where I'd left him. The hastily raised tent was kept standing more by wards than wood, not that he seemed to notice. Earlier he'd been using scrying rituals with some difficulty, going through the Observatory, but now he was instead running spells on the storm dust he'd sent Apprentice out to gather. Though the outer ward would have warned him of my entry he did not immediately turn. I left him to his spells, waiting in silence as I leaned against my staff. He turned to me when he was good and ready.

"It was a ritual," Hierophant said.

I glanced at the dust but he shook his head.

"This is simply dust," he said. "We are near the Gust Ribbon from what I gathered while scrying, so the dust storm itself was drawn out of it by the first part of the ritual and only then empowered. There are striations in the magic saturation of the dust that make the sequence plain to see."

Near the Gust Ribbon wasn't saying much, as it was a winding and moving region that stretched across the northwest third of the

Wasteland. Wasn't overall reassuring, though, considering it was called that because it was plagued by sudden and powerful storms that had a nasty tendency to spill out in every direction. It wouldn't be safe to stay here long even if we didn't get hammered by another ritual.

"So someone leashed a dust storm, empowered it with a spell and sent it our way?" I asked.

"It was quite brilliantly done," Masego said. "The dust, you see, solved the issue of air being able to hold too little magic for most large-scale ritual work. The storm was turned into an array that thinned the boundary between the Ways and Creation – which is already very thin – until it was on the very edge of shattering."

"Are you telling me that the *physical weight* of my army is what shattered the Twilight Ways?" I flatly asked.

"As I said," Masego smiled, "quite brilliantly done."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"This is Malicia," I said.

It had to be. People had been telling me again and again that weather sorcery was the specialty of Taghreb, and there was only one army out there that fielded a significant amount of high-calibre Taghreb mages. More than that, we'd known for months that while High Lady Takisha of Kahtan had played coy with sending the Tower actual troops she'd not been shy with providing mages instead. It'd take more than just a few cadres of talented mages to pull off something like this, though. I knew that and so did he.

"This is Akua Sahelian," Masego corrected, confirming my fear. "There are maybe four other practitioners in Praes capable of such a ritual, but there appears to have been an uncontrolled surge in the middle of the span – I suspect mages grew exhausted and their replacements had inadequate control – that was masterfully redirected instead of allowed to collapse the entire working."

He paused.

"I would be capable of this," he said, without a hint of a boast. "My father was, and so was Dumisai of Aksum. I would not bet on Naziha Sarrif being so capable, however, and she is the finest mage in the south. There is only one woman in all of Praes with the talent and schooling to do it."

His face was calm.

"I have already told you her name."

That was what happened, I told myself, when you let someone as dangerous Akua go to your enemy's side. She didn't stop being dangerous, it was just turned on you instead. I breathed out, suddenly tired. I had seventy-nine names to learn. I owed that, and truthfully more than was possible to repay.

"I found something interesting, however," Hierophant said. "The way the boundaries of the ritual array were defined was... peculiar."

I cocked an eyebrow at him, silently urging him to continue.

"Much more of the Ways fell than was necessary," Masego said. "Without looking at the equations myself I cannot be certain, but it seems to me that the power could have been made... narrower. Concentrated on ensuring there would be a faller from higher up instead of such a large swath of territory."

My fingers clenched.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"That no one capable of crafting such a ritual," Hierophant evenly replied, "would have made such a mistake in ignorance. It was a choice."

A pulled punch, he was saying. Seventy-nine dead, my entire army paralyzed, and still a pulled punch. Not without reason had we once named that woman the doom of an entire city. I silently nodded, at loss for words. Glowing, fiery eyes studied be from beneath the eye cloth.

"I do not understand why she is no longer with us," Masego admitted. "Is this about revenge? Indrani tells me that in Hainaut you had the opportunity to let her go to her death. I had thought – and she – that you refused because you were letting go of all this long prices business."

He paused.

"She is no longer here," Masego plainly said, "and so I am confused."

"One hundred thousand dead, Zeze," I quietly said. "She doesn't get to have that swept under the rug. Nobody does."

"So it is revenge," Masego mused, brightening for having understood. "Why let her go to the Tower and become the Warlock, then? It does not strike me as a very good vengeance."

"Because she'll hate it," I quietly said. "It will be everything she has been taught to want, but even as she gets it every

victory will taste like ashes in her mouth. And when reaches the end of that line, of that dreadful dream, it will not be joy she feels."

It would be horror, I thought. Horror at the prospect of spending the rest of her life wearing shackles around her wrists that she would have put on herself. And the moment she understood that, understood that she wanted to be *better* than the girl she'd once been instead of simply an older, crueller version of her, I would be there. Waiting with an offer that she would accept.

"And after?" Masego asked.

"She trades a broken dream for a broken crown," I murmured.

I did not believe we could destroy the Hidden Horror, not truly. Not now and even less after we gifted him the crown of Autumn. So he would need a prison and a warden. A box he would surely break in time, a pit he would dig himself out of, but a realm of endless paths? That might do the trick. There he would be cursed to wander forever alone, as a broken queen on a broken throne kept him imprisoned until the end of times. And that queen's throne would lie in the heart of the city she had doomed, perched atop her very folly as she kept the peace of Twilight. She would make the choice herself, willingly and without coercion. That was the retribution I owed a hundred thousand screaming souls: an endless vigil holding back a greater evil, knowing every part of it was of her own making.

I was Callowan. My prices were long, and paid twice.

—

The first scouts returned with word of a town to our southeast. Scrying wasn't working well in the region, which Masego believed to be because of the same ritual that'd brought us down. To sum up a quarter-hour explanation, 'much magic in sky dust makes magic in sky difficult'. I shared this summary with the table, which prompted him to admit he wished he had a way to disown me. On the bright side, he also believed that while it was still unsafe to return to the Twilight Ways for at least two weeks it was unlikely that we were going to be hit with a storm again. The same phenomenon that screwed up scrying would make it 'astronomically difficult' to get another ritual going. I'd intended on going back into the camp after the conversation, but Juniper had notions of her own.

"You're pacing back and forth like a tiger in a cage," the Hellhound said. "Make yourself useful instead. Take knights and have a look at the town, find out where we are."

"I'm not *pacing*," I reflexively defended, but she had a point.



I took thirty knights of the Order and Scribe too, since she was the woman with the maps. Eudokia didn't recognize the region itself, though she did note that the dusty and rocky grounds here would be a good fit for certain parts of the Cradle: a rough square of land near the middle of the Wasteland that had fairly steady weather but got the spills from more... exotic parts. We rode out briskly, finding the town the scouts had marked in less than an hour. It wasn't anything all that impressive, I saw as we got closer. A walled town large enough to hold maybe a few hundred souls, surrounded by sparse farms and skeletal orchards. We found several wells on the way, though, which was good news. Too many of our water barrels had broken during the fall.

The gates were closed when we got there, an iron-barded set tall as a man but too cramped for most carts. No great traders, then. The walls weren't anything I'd have a hard time smashing with Night if I put my back into it: six to eight uneven feet of stacked stone and mud with wooden spikes on top. Over the gates, an old dark-skinned woman in faded robes was waiting for us. Spread out further atop the walls were maybe a dozen archers and an unarmed pair of middle-aged siblings that must have been the town mages. They weren't the ones in charge, though, as was made clear when we reined in our horses at the edge of bow range and got called out by the old woman.

"State your business," she demanded. "Are you with the army to the north?"

I blinked. My knights carried the royal banner with them, which usually got recognized and took care of most questions before the talking began. Not so this time, evidently. Seeing no point in subtlety out in the middle of nowhere, I went with straightforward instead.

"I am Queen Catherine of Callow," I called back. "I only want to talk and buy goods."

There was some consternation atop the wall, several others coming close to the old woman before she angrily waved them away.

"There's nothing worth burning here," the old woman yelled out at me. "Go away."

I sighed. Why was it never the useful parts of my reputation that preceded me? Deciding to make a point, I murmured a prayer to the Crows and let the Night sluggishly wake to my words. I went for something loud and dangerous looking over actually dangerous, blasting a chunk of the countryside in a whirl of black flames. I let silence follow in that sights's wake as it sunk in that I could wield the same power against their wall to fairly predictable results. I then politely requested to be let in so we could talk and I could arrange the buying of goods, which after some arguing between the 'warriors' was granted.

The gates swung open and we were ushered through deserted dirt streets to a hall of stone. There the old woman from earlier received us by a great fire and extended hospitality in the name of the town, Ogarin. We refrained from accepting food or drink anyway. She introduced herself as Anan, the current *haku* to the town. Bailiff was probably the closest equivalent to the title we had back home, from what I understood, as a haku's authority was centred around arranging the collection of communal taxes and work levies in the name of the local lord. The town was part of the territory of a Lord Abara, she informed us, who ruled from a fortress called Kala further to the southeast and situated at the bottom of the eponymous Kala Hills.

"I'll bargain so the town does not get sacked, Your Majesty," Anan said, "but we don't have much to trade. We already sent our crop tax south to the fortress. There's been a food levy across the Wasteland."

I frowned.

"Who does Lord Abara swear to?" I asked.

She snorted.

"His uncle swore to Wolof, but that was in High Lady Tasia's day," she said. "Now he's sworn to no one. It was the Tower that came to collect."

So Malicia – more likely the Black Knight through her – had been emptying the Wasteland of food, to feed Marshal Nim army and make sure my own wouldn't be able to add to its supplies from the local stores. Not without starving towns and villages, anyway, which aside from being deeply distasteful to me was likely to mean resistance to my troops from locals. No one liked having the table robbed by a foreign invader, as my childhood in Laure had intimately taught me. We got a little more out of Anan about the region we'd ended up in with some wheedling. Ogarin was at the northwestern edge of Lord Abara's lands but linked by a dirt path to a better road that Anan called the 'half-road'. I asked, naturally. It was a name that pretty much demanded it.

"We're between imperial highways," Anan said. "One of the old Abara – in my great, great grandmother's day – swore himself to Aksum, and to make it stick he planned to connect Kala to the highway between Ater and Aksum. It was going to make us rich, he claimed. Only he died before it was done. His daughter instead went back to the Tower's protection and pocketed the gold, leaving the job half done."

The half-road wasn't properly paved, she explained, just made of stone. While usable for carts it tended to be rough on the axles. It went towards the southeast, eventually coming close to the Moule Hills. Those were a bunch of steep slopes, so in practice

the road was nestled in a valley between the Moule Hills to the south and Kala Hills to the north. North of said Kala Hills, she continued, was the small Nioqe Lake and the other town sworn to Lord Abara, Risas. Further north than that was the southern edge of the large Jini Plateau: all cliffs there, nothing we could travel through.

The way I figured, the sooner we got on the half-road and began moving south the better. I'd suggest a detachment head out to Nioqe Lake to see to our water situation, but there simply weren't enough water sources in the region to sustain the presence of an army as large as mine for long.

As for trading, strictly speaking it was treason for the town to bargain with us while we were at war. I allowed the shadow of a possible sack to loom over the negotiations, though, which motivated the town to do it anyway. It wasn't my intention to go through with it, but if my reputation was black in these parts then I had no qualms in using that. There wasn't much food and Anan was reluctant to part with what was left, but tools and wood were on the table – armies chewed through those like hounds through meat – and I promised to restrain my soldiers from robbing farms or entering the town. I even paid a generous fee for use of their wells, which Anan did not need to know was from the Wolof treasury.

When we were done talking I stretched, groaning, and offered her a friendly smile. We'd been at this for over an hour now, and I was ready to leave. There was still one little detail to take care of first, though,

"So," I said, "how likely is it that some of your dimmer boys and girls are outside and planning something unwise?"

Her creased face tightened.

"Not unlikely," Anan finally said.

"I still remember what it's like, wanting to put down monster to make a name," I said. "So I'll let that go."

I met her rheumy eyes with mine.

"If it ends now."

She swallowed. Anan preceded us outside, and while there was some shouting and a small scuffle it ended without corpses on the ground.

Three cheers for diplomacy, I thought, and got back on my borrowed horse.

We got some trouble with the locals the first night after we crashed, but not the two-legged kind. Our palisade, which had been hastily raised, was hit just after Midnight Bell by what we first believed to be enemy soldiers but turned out to be a coordinated attack by a pack of tigers. The unreasonably astute animals actually hit another spot in the palisade as a distraction while the rest dug their way under, attacking horses and cattle. Archer and the Huntress got themselves a few pelts for the trouble, but of the dozen tigers that came six still survived and ran away with full bellies. It was only to be the beginning of our troubles, I found out to my dismay.

A colony of head-sized scorpions took offence to our presence the following day and began attacking legionaries whenever they stepped outside the vermin wards, which thankfully held them back. It only stopped when I set out with a mage line and torched their underground lair, to a disquieting amount of chittering screams. A decision was made not to openly prevent my sappers from going into the charred ruin and stealing some eggs, considering scorpion fights tended to be good for the morale of the little bastards.

Then the soldiers that went to fill up water barrels at Nioque Lake – under the wary eyes of the townsfolk of Risas, whose homes were on the opposite shore – were ambushed by some sort of shrieking freshwater squid that dragged two men under before the Squire and the Apprentice killed it. Its flesh was apparently considered a delicacy in the Wasteland, Aisha informed me, because everyone in this bloody place was *completely mad*. I refused to have a bite out of principle, though Masego assured me with guileless malice it was delicious.

Archer was having the time of her life, at least, and came dragging back the carcass of what looked like a cow-sized lion with bat wings and a stinger-tipped tail the following afternoon. Masego was delighted enough when she offered him the venom glands that he enthusiastically kissed her cheeks, which had her in a terrifyingly good mood the rest of the day. I was only glad she'd killed the damned thing while out hunting and not after it'd flown into the camp and eaten a few of my soldiers. Not that our short turn in luck stopped a flock of blood-drinking bats that spat out paralytic venom – charmingly called something that translated 'night kissers' by Soninke, Aisha said – from attacking one of our night patrols.

The entire Wasteland was a fucking death trap.

It looked like we were going to be ready to march by Noon Bell on the third day, though, so I sat with Juniper to put together a vanguard. Two thousand light foot from Levant would do, we decided, with Archer and I accompanying them. Razin Tanja, whose forces were chosen to march, was pleased to be given the front as

Levantines always were when awarded the possibility of being the first to be shot by arrows. Took all sorts. The Dominion warriors had taken well to the Wasteland, to my amused horror, Lady Aquiline even admitted it made her a little homesick. Fewer trees here than the Brocelian, she said, but the animals had a lot in common.

No wonder Levantines raided so much, I unkindly thought. I'd get out of the house as much as possible if my home was full of godsdamned bloodsucking bats, and fight for the privilege too.

We set out in passably good order just after Noon Bell, largely as we'd planned and to the palpable relief of many Callowan legionaries. I rode out with Razin and Archer for company, to a surprising chill under the afternoon sun. A cold wind was blowing in from the northeast, over the Jini Plateau. An hour got us to the half-road and from there we quickened the pace going southeast, until we came in distance of the Moule Hills and I was forced to call a halt. Not because three hours of marching had tired us out, but something entirely worse. On the steep northern slopes of those hills a fortified camp had been raised, wooden walls bristling with scorpions and catapults as six banners flew above them in the wind.

One for each of the five legions under Marshal Nim, one for the Tower.

## Chapter 14: Nock

*"The right kind of defeat can be more useful than a victory."*

– Dread Empress Prudence, the Frequently Vanquished

The two of us reined in our horses a prudent hundred feet away from the bottom of the slope.

A fortified camp looked down at us from the heights of the Moule Hills, raised grounds with a palisade and a dry moat. There were artillery platforms looming beyond the wooden rampart, at least two that I saw, and more than a dozen scorpions glaring down at the Army of Callow's vanguard from atop the palisade. My lips thinned as I took into consideration the steep slope leading up and the length of it going up – at least a few hundred feet – and how bloody taking that camp was likely to get should we try. I'd lose a hundred men for every foot, I darkly thought, the moment Marshal Nim brought out her crossbows.

"That wasn't there yesterday," Archer muttered. "I didn't come too close, Cat, but I would have seen it in the distance."

"They did it overnight, maybe?" I guessed. "Goblins can work during the dark, we've pulled that trick before. Then they bring in orc and humans after sunup when the foundations are laid."

That might mean they'd not finished the works too long before we arrived. And possibly that the defences weren't as thorough as it would seem from down here. Archer was visibly itching to ditch the horse and go have a closer look on foot but she restrained herself. Instead I felt the world shiver ever-so-slightly as she drew on an aspect, leaning forward on her horse.

"Moat's not even," Archer said, eyes distant. "And there's still goblins working on the side of the camp to make it go fully around."

I wouldn't be able to match her sight without drawing on Night and I'd rather not draw on that frivolously under the afternoon sun, so I simply took her word for it.

"Definitely overnight, then," I mused.

That made what they'd gotten up in time even more impressive. Much as it stung to admit it, the Army of Callow wouldn't have been able to manage the same. We lacked the sappers and the expertise: a lot of my legionaries had spent no more than six months in training camps before being considered ready for war. The Legions regularly trained and drilled their soldiers in ways the war against Keter had simply not afforded me the time to do. My people were veterans, but they were veterans of a very particular kind of war.

"Your rider will get to Juniper soon," Indrani noted. "We waiting for her orders or heading out to tickle the devils up early?"

I grimaced. Taking light foot up a hill into a hardened Legion position wasn't going to achieve much except corpses. She'd not meant taking the Malaga troops, though, but the two of us. Thing was, I wasn't sure we should. Not when the Marshal Nim would have a bunch of high-class mage cadres waiting and Akua Sahelian leading them. The odds of something nasty waiting for us up there were about the same as those of the sun rising tomorrow.

Might be it wouldn't, but I wouldn't bet on it.

"I'm not touching that camp without a bigger crew than just the two of us," I said. "And I'll let you loose to scout, since I know it's a lost cause to stop you, but I want you to promise to keep your distance."

Indrani considered me a moment.

"Worried about the mages?" she finally asked.

"They know which Named we field now," I reminded her. "Nim and Malicia aren't idiots, they'll have spent time and coin figuring out how to kill all of you."

"I'll be a good girl, then," Indrani drawled. "Promised."

I rolled my eye at her, feeling a pang of discomfort when I realized I was facing the wrong way for her to be able to see it. All she had to look at was an eye cloth over a hollow socket. It was the little things that distressed me the most, somehow. Wounds I knew, had learned to live with. Limp along with. Losing an eye had been... more than that, in a lot of little ways. Archer waited until we'd returned to the ranks of the vanguard before passing off her horse, wandering off to find a way to sidle into the Ways. Though it was still dangerous to travel those and it'd still remain that way for the better part of two weeks, it was the sort of environment she thrived in.

A broken-down patch of the Ways where a single misstep might see her falling through the sky? Archer would take to that like a fish to water. It was when she'd be back in Creation that worried me.

Not that I had a lot of time to spare on that. The Levantine warriors that made up the vanguard of the Army of Callow had been advancing in a broad column until we'd caught sight of the enemy camp, going down the half-road, but when I'd called a halt Razin had pulled them out of marching order and begun ordering them into warbands. It was the right instinct, because right now the army behind was spread out along that road like a snake. Juniper would put the column into battle order soon enough, I thought, and I didn't think that the Black Knight would have staked out that position in the heights to then abandon it at the first opportunity.

But there were troops Marshal Nim could throw at us without abandoning her position, and sure enough as I rode through the throng of Levantine warbands I heard exclamations of surprise from the ranks. From the eastern face of Moule Hills horsemen were pouring out in neat ranks, though where they'd emerged from was hidden by a large fold of rock. Hundreds, I counted, then more than a thousand. Fuck, was Nim throwing her entire horse at us? If so, we were in deep shit. The last reports had her at three thousand light horse to our vanguard of two thousand and a half-thousand of heavy horse from the Thirteenth to throw in should she feel like it.

"Razin," I shouted over the din, forcing people away with my staff. "*Razin.*"

The sound of my voice caught his attention over the din, drawing his eyes to me and away from his advising captains.

"Shield wall *now*," I called out. "Pack it tight or we're all dead."

If Nim had sent goblin skirmishers I would have advised we retreat instead, but we wouldn't outrun cavalry on flat grounds. To Razin's honour, he wasted in time in following through. Shouting in Ceseo he got his captains moving, the quick-footed Levantine warbands gathering into a fat uneven circle. I dismounted, heading for the front as shields were raised. In the distance, across the grounds, the enemy horse advanced at a brisk trot and formed into four slender wedges. They were long and thin, so it was hard to tell how many riders there were. More than a thousand, at least, but how *many* more? I found good solid ground to stand on, slightly away from the shields up front, and after making sure the warriors around were giving me a wide berth I closed my eyes and began to pray to the Sisters.

"Wake up," I murmured in Crepuscular. "We have a war on our hands and I need a miracle to teach the enemy to fear me again. Wake up, carrion crows. There's blood in the air."

As I continued to murmur the Night began to move, lazily slithering into my veins, reluctant to brave the heavy sun. I kept drawing it in, murmurs flowing freely as the power began to accrue. There were shouts in Ceseo as the Levantine captains whose men had slingers among them – a lot of Dominion warriors had picked up the habit of carrying slings as well as their usual arms in Hainaut, since they were so useful against the dead – told them to get ready. A few heartbeats later the enemy closed the distance, Taghreb and Soninke in vividly coloured scale and cloth. War cries sounded on both sides, and though a few stones split open heads it was nothing to what we suffered in return.

Our shield wall was tight and packed, which I'd asked of Razin to discourage the enemy charging us. Light horse wouldn't want to get mired in our ranks, it'd be like a mud pit for them. The downside was the same as the upside, unfortunately: the shield wall was tight and packed. So when the enemy cavalry began throwing javelins with all the strength of a charge behind them, those steel-tipped killers found their marks and then some. Shields splintered and broke, men fell with screams and I got my first good look at well-trained Wasteland horse making war. All four of the wedges that'd threatened a charge stopped well shy of our ranks, instead splitting to the sides and riding backwards smoothly.

The riders at the front threw their javelin and then retreated, making room for a fresh horseman to toss their own. The impact was... bloody. Worse than arrow fire would have been, if not as sustained.

I'd gathered power enough to give an answer, though. Night flared up, wreathing me in shadow, and above the enemy horse I began to



gather specks of black flame. I wasn't going to bother with subtle here: if I could burn through a chunk of their cavalry today the Loyalist Legions would be significantly easier to handle going forward. To my surprise the horsemen did not disperse at the sight, continuing their deadly javelin fire, and I saw why a moment later. There was a great surge of sorcery up on the heights, two transparent but roiling rings beginning to form. I stole away a sliver of the Night running through me, sharpening my eyes, and almost cursed. That was raw kinetic power they were gathering; I'd seen the likes of it before.

If that hit the ranks of the vanguard javelins would be the least of our problems. With the shield wall broken, we'd just get run down by the cavalry like animals.

Whoever had designed that trap had an uncomfortably good read on my abilities. I couldn't abandon my working with the Night and rustle up another to handle this, not at this time of the day, which meant I'd have to break it apart and remake it. Gritting my teeth, I did. The black flames gutted out into smoke, the power instead expanding those puffs into great tendrils of dark mist. The kinetic rings flew out, the sound they made comically wobbly, but I moved the mist in the way. The working devoured the sorcery as it went through, leaving little more than a short burst of wind to reach our ranks. That wasn't a victory, though, when the horsemen had been hammering at us all the while.

At this rate they'd run out of javelins before we gave an answer.

The Levantines were itching to ditch the shield wall and charge, given how close the riders were – another trap – but discipline held. Razin went through the ranks giving encouragement even as I began gathering Night again, his captains forcefully pulling back warriors that began to break the ranks. I'd have to let the Levantines take the hit, I realized. We could probably survive the magical bombardment, but if I didn't hit the horsemen they were *definitely* going to overrun our position the moment they got done softening us up with javelins. It was a shitty choice to make, but I didn't have a better one on the table. Best make my miracle count, then.

I had an idea or two in mind and I took to weaving even as power began rising atop the heights again – only to suddenly fall apart. I blinked in surprise, confused, only to then let out a sharp laugh. *Archer*. Archer had put an arrow into whoever had been leading that ritual. This was as close to an opening as I'd get.

Then the ground behind us began trembling. Yet it was not cries of dismay that greeted the change. I glanced back, finding the banner of the Broken Bells flying tall in the wind as they rode hard to relieve us. Juniper must have sent them out before we even caught sight of the enemy cavalry, for them to get her so

quickly. The arrival of other horsemen saw the Legion auxiliaries lose their taste for the skirmish, unloading another few javelins our way spitefully and then smoothly pulling away. My knights began pursuit, passing by our position at a gallop, but they weren't going to catch up to light horse and they knew it.

Brandon Talbot pulled the Order back when the enemy was driven most of the way back to their camp. I kept an eye on the heights all the while, waiting for magic to erupt again, but no ritual followed. I released the Night, feeling a wave of exhaustion, and the bloodied vanguard began its retreat back to the rest of the army. We'd survived, I told myself. Marshal Nim had given us a black eye, but we'd survived.

It wasn't much, but it was something.

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"The best we can say is that it stopped shy of being a disaster," Juniper bluntly assessed.

Three hundred and sixty-three dead, almost twice that wounded. Over half of our two thousand strong vanguard had been shredded over the course of a skirmish that'd lasted maybe half an hour. There would have been a lot more corpses on the ground if we'd not been able to retreat to healers, but that was cold comfort considering we were unlikely to have all the wounded back on their feet before nightfall.

"The Black Knight caught us with our trousers down," Aisha admitted. "Our scouts had no idea the Legions were here, much less camped above the only road. It is a major failure of our forward elements."

That was a very polite way of phrasing 'we stumbled in blind and got spanked', but the lovely Taghreb did have a way of doing that.

"We turtled up after we got hit in the Ways," I said. "And it cost us. Now two ways about it."

I wouldn't pretend otherwise.

"But now we know Nim's here, so she's shot her arrow," I reminded them. "She won't catch us out like this again."

It'd been less than an hour since the enemy cavalry had retreated. We'd used that time to form up the Army of Callow and its auxiliaries in a battle line across the half-road, facing the fortified camp in the hills, but the Legions of Terror showed no inclination of coming down to fight us. It was just Juniper and Aisha here with me here in the field tent, General Zola being charged with handling affairs on the front, so none of us

bothered to put a better face than was true on our current situation.

"We can't attack that camp," Aisha said, voicing an opinion we all shared. "It would be throwing an egg at a wall."

"We need to turn her position," I said. "Either to the east or west. So long she's the one sitting on top of the half-road she can keep bringing up fresh supplies and water to her camp while we'll be eating into our own reserves."

"That's the trap, Catherine," the Hellhound growled. "She's making it seem like she's ceding us the initiative by staying up in her camp, but she hasn't. We can't leave through the Ways and we'll slow to a crawl if we leave the road."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"The grounds are too rocky west of Moule Hills," Aisha told me in her stead. "Unless we put the sappers to making a path for us, we'd just be wrecking the wheels we just got done putting back on."

Might still be possible to do it if we moved really slow, but if we did we'd get hit. She'd harass us with skirmishers and cavalry from a safe distance, bleeding my army out one cut at a time. And while it would be possible for the Army of Callow to advance ahead of its supplies at a quicker pace, it would be a *very bad* idea. We were tethered to those wagons, because the alternative was the Black Knight's three thousand cavalry sallying out and torching the wagons carrying all our food and water. Marshal Nim was living up to her reputation as one of the three most decorated officers in all of Praes: she'd found a way to hem us in without even setting foot outside her fortified camp.

"That leaves only the half-road," I said, openly unenthused.

It'd mean marching down the valley between Moule Hills and Kala Hills with a larger enemy force on our flank that was set up in entrenched high grounds. We'd be doing that on open grounds all the while, while the enemy had their war engines pointed at us from above. It had disaster written all over it.

"It might be possible to keep close to the bottom of the Kala Hills and make it south without a battle ensuing," Aisha argued. "It'd be a risk for her to try us: in an enclosed space like the valley we could maneuver to negate her advantage in numbers."

"And on tight grounds the Order would punch much harder than her own horse," Juniper grunted. "But it won't work, Aisha. She'll just decamp and use the road to outpace us going south. Then she'll set up at Kala Fortress with stone walls to defend from and her supply line still safe at her back."

Which would just be moving the problem a few hours south, assuming it even worked. Which I was significantly less inclined to believe than Aisha was.

"We could march back north," I suggested. "Go around this entire region, find another way through."

"We'd be rolling dice," Aisha grimaced. "We can't go back into the Ways and if the Gale Ribbon spits out a storm at us the results could be almost as bad as a defeat."

She wasn't wrong, though it might honestly still be better than engaging the Black Knight on her chosen grounds. Unlike the Legions of Terror, after mauling us the storm wouldn't *pursue*.

"North is right," Juniper gravelled. "But into Kala Hills. Northeast."

"Those are a dead end," I frowned. "Even if we set up a camp on those heights facing hers, all we do is run out our supplies while she watches us."

Nim wouldn't be any more eager to attack our camp than we were to attack hers, we wouldn't bait her into making that mistake. Especially not when Malicia and her Black Knight were well aware that I could only spend so long settling affairs in Praes. It was to their advantage to wait me out without even giving battle, since without a decisive victory against the Tower my bargaining position was weak.

"Are they a dead end?" Juniper replied, clicking her teeth thoughtfully.

She went looking through her papers, eventually taking out a parchment sheath she pressed into my hands. It was a report, I saw, from the captain that'd overseen the detachment that had gone to Nioqe Lake to fill water barrels. A significant chunk of it was spent going over the freshwater squid attack and praising the two young heroes that'd killed the creature. I glanced at Juniper, unsure why she'd hand me this. I'd already told the kids they'd done well.

"What am I looking for?" I asked.

"Captain Henry mentions seeing locals on the opposite shore," Juniper said. "Fishermen, as is to be expected of a lakeside town, but also those bringing cattle to drink."

I scanned for the line, eye narrowing when I found it. The officer had mentioned seeing sheep, specifically, and I finally found my marshal's line of thought.

"Goats they could feed on scraps, but they'd need grazing lands for sheep," I muttered. "And we haven't seen any suitable grounds on the other side, so you think they're-"

"In the Kala Hills," Juniper finished. "And that means shepherd paths, maybe all the way through."

Even if we found those paths they wouldn't be broad enough to let our army cross, but that was why we had sappers. Should we cross the hills and march south it was almost certain that the Legions would still beat us to Kala Fortress, but it wouldn't matter as much. We wouldn't be bottled up in the valley anymore, we could swing wide to the east and go through the rainlands until we eventually found another stretch of the half-road to march on. Marshal Nim would *have* to come and fight us on our terms; otherwise we'd cut her supply lines and have freedom to march on a lightly defended Ater even as Sepulchral caught up to the Loyalist Legions.

"It is already too late in the afternoon for giving battle to be anything but risky, regardless," Aisha noted.

No one argued with that. The Black Knight had the Eighth Legion with her, the Trailblazers, and General Wheeler's ranks were heavy on both goblins and skirmishers. If fighting continued after dark we'd be at a stark disadvantage.

"Kala Hills, then," I agreed.

—

The slopes weren't as steep here as they were on the Moule Hills to the south, but the stone was softer. Easier to use as foundations. The Kala Hills were also covered with brushlands and Pickler assured me having local wood to cut made building the camp much easier. The work only began midafternoon, which was uncomfortably late, but the Black Knight hadn't just sat in her camp looking pretty as we moved. Skirmishers were out and about with the hour's turn, harassing our retreat as we marched away. Juniper sent out the Levantines and our own Army skirmishers to match them, but the Order stayed put. We needed the knights ready in case Nim sent out her own cavalry, we had nothing else that'd be swift enough to stop her from chewing up our light foot.

This once the fight went our way, at least. I was done fucking around after the mauling we'd taken, so I sent out Named in force. The Silver Huntress was like a thresher in a wheat field, fighting skirmishers, and she had a lot of anger to work out. The Squire got himself two crossbow bolts in the stomach after getting cocky but with the Apprentice at his side it was far from enough to kill him. He'd eat only broth for a week, I thought, and be a wiser man for it. Just because goblins were half his size didn't mean that charging crossbowmen on foot was any less

foolish. The Empire had designed those things to punch through plate, knight-killers.

The enemy broke off shortly before nightfall, their cavalry having never come out. Another hundred dead on our side, but we'd inflicted easily twice that. Nim would think twice about testing us like this in the future and the Malaga warriors raised their heads for having avenged their honour in the rematch.

I stayed back to level hilltops with Night so our sappers would make progress quicker but it was still frustratingly slow-going. There'd be no dry moat for us and the palisade was patchy in places: we'd put a priority on getting the wards in place, since the last thing we wanted was to suffer magic bombardment in the middle of the night. Nightfall saw the Army of Callow retreating into its half-done camp, tents raised and fires roaring. Come morning I'd take Archer and the Silver Huntress out in the hills, looking for paths, but after the exhausting day I just wanted to sleep. My head barely hit the pillow before I blacked out.

Cruelly, I was awakened what felt like a single heartbeat later.

Alarm wards were pounding away at the night air. I dragged myself into trousers and hastily put on my armour, snatching my sword and staff as I exited only to almost stumble into a large orc sergeant.

"Report," I ordered, tightening my sword belt.

"Under attack ma'am," he gravelled.

I rolled my eye. Yes, I'd deduced as much somehow.

"Who, where?" I pressed.

"They came from the hills, behind the camp," the sergeant said. "Staff Tribune Bishara claims it's the Eleventh Legion."

It took me a moment to place that. Cognomen 'Tenebrous', led by General Lucretia. The sole officer that'd been a general in the Legions before the Reforms and stayed one after. Also a vampire, some sort of flesh-eating undead. Her legion had been under Grem One-Eye during the Conquest, attacking the Wall, but I couldn't remember anything in particular that'd distinguished it. The Eleventh stayed in the Wasteland ever since, so I'd never had to deal with any part of it. My belt was comfortably set, so I laid a hand on the pommel of my sword and straightened my back.

"All right, sergeant," I said. "What's the situation?"

"Marshal Juniper requests that you head to the breach," he said.

"Let's get to it, then."

The camp was in decent order, considering we'd gotten attacked right after Midnight Bell. My legionaries were gathering briskly for a counter push, the element of surprise having passed. It was only when we got to the breach that I winced. The Eleventh hadn't hit the Army of Callow, I saw, but the *Levantine*s. The chunk of the patchy palisade that'd been broken through with now-abandoned rams had led straight to where the day's wounded were kept. The same warriors that'd bled down on the plains. Legionaries with shields painted in green and black had overwhelmed the tents and slaughtered the surprised Dominion force, but by the look of the bodies and scorch marks a force of Lanterns and Osenas slayers had stopped them in their tracks. By the time I got here, the Legion incursion – a mere five companies, by the looks of it – was being driven back even if most of the Dominion warriors were only half-dressed.

The trouble came from further back: deadly crossbow volleys were being poured into the shield wall from a hill in the distance. We'd stemmed the tide, the camp was in no danger of being overwhelmed, but bodies would keep piling up until we cleared out that fucking hill. That'd be my job, looked like. Razin and Aquiline were easy to pick out from the throng, just by the way their people rallied to them, and I saw that both the Silver Huntress and the Barrow Sword were with them. Deciding I could use the help, I limped my way to them. I quickly exchanged greetings with the lordlings, then the Named.

"Black Queen," Ishaq greeted me, grinning. "Nice night, isn't it?"

"They disturbed my beauty sleep," I flatly replied. "Someone's going to die for that."

Some chuckles, but Alexis was grimly serious.

"Orders?" the Silver Huntress asked.

"I want you two and a good line of twenty killers," I said. "We're going to silence those crossbows."

"It would help," Razin admitted. "Marshal Juniper is sending crossbowmen of our own but they have yet to arrive."

"I'll go," Aquiline said. "My retinue will serve."

I wanted to argue, but that glint in her eye told me she was going to be obstinate and we didn't have the *time*.

"Fine," I grunted. "Lord Razin, you have the command."

He nodded, then snuck a kiss to his fiancée.

"Do try not to get another scar," he teased her. "You know how jealous I get."

"No promises," Aquiline grinned.

Ugh, young love. I shared a disgruntled look with Alexis, though for some reason the Barrow Sword was looking rather fondly at the pair. I didn't want to take slayers with us, I made clear to Aquiline, so she drew twenty sword and board men from her retinue instead and we circled the melee at the gap. The Barrow Sword opened a path through a weak patch of the palisade with a mule kick, large enough for us to make it out onto the hills. All three of us Named could see in the dark at least decently, so we guided the Levantines through the sloping brushlands. Several times we had to outright climb up, so I had to kill the pain in my bad leg with Night, but we made good pace anyway.

The enemy had chosen a tall, flat-topped hill to position their crossbowmen so they weren't difficult to spot. Two hundred of them, firing in rotation to obscure their numbers. They were probably hoping to bait legionaries into exposing themselves before unleashing proper volleys, I thought. I was not much enjoying fighting the Legions of Terrors. I'd much preferred having that particular war machine on my side. Still, the reason I grimaced and gestured for our warband to crouch into the bushes wasn't the crossbowmen: it was the few skulking shapes at the bottom of that same hill. Goblins. *Sappers*.

"We have to hit the hill from here," I whispered.

I got odd looks for it.

"There's sappers afoot," I flatly stated. "Every approach to that hill will be mined to the Hells and back. We try to walk through a field they set up and *maybe* two of us will make it there."

Maybe. If the sappers were having an off night. Names helped you against a lot of things but stepping into a gout of goblinfire wasn't one of them. We found defensible grounds, a dip between two hills that had just low enough a rim that I could look at the enemy crossbowmen and aim, and Aquiline's men spread out around me in a loose circle. I silently gestured for Ishaq to keep an eye on the Lady of Tartessos when she wasn't looking but kept the Silver Huntress close. She had sharp reflexes and I'd not be able to move much while weaving Night. I breathed out, looking at the sky, and struck my staff against the rocky ground.

"Sun's gone, Sisters," I spoke in Crepuscular. "Let's play, yeah?"

The power came eagerly when I called, as if to make up for its sluggishness during the day. In a low murmur I spoke my prayers, shaping the working as I drew more and more Night into myself.



I'd expected the enemy to catch on to our presence sooner or later, but that wasn't exactly what we got. Suddenly – when I had gathered enough Night into one place, I guessed – there was a ripple of magic in the air and a red circle of light formed about two hundred feet above our position. You know, revealing it to anyone looking. I paused in my incantation.

"Fuck you," I feelingly told the sky, and also Akua Sahelian.

The enemy must have been expecting us because it couldn't have been longer than a hundred heartbeats before they struck. They came out of the night like ghosts, a single line of twenty legionaries. But these were not regulars or heavies, I thought. Their armour was light, leather and breastplates, and none of them wore helmets. Their hair flew freely in the wind, long and dark and oddly animated. Each bore a single sword and a long spear. They... didn't move right. They were beautiful, I thought, dark-skinned and dark-eyed but with impossibly smooth skin. My mind was being clouded, I recognized. After I bit my lip hard the beauty waned. Their skin was smooth as corpse's because that was exactly what they were.

Not a single one of them breathed.

They struck in silence, three warriors dying before Alexis could warn them we were under attack, but I kept whispering my prayers. Almost there. Aquiline and Ishaq took on one of the enemies together, the Osená hooking his spear and dragging him close enough the Barrow Sword could take off his head. The legionary exploded into a spray of dust and rotten flesh, armour falling into the rocks. The Silver Huntress parried a spear tossed at my side then threw her own with a flash of Light, slaying the sender without batting an eye. The proximity of Light almost destabilized my working, but with a soft curse and desperate haste I compensated. Just a moment now, aligning it just right...

"Burn them all," I hissed in Crepuscular.

The circle of black flame erupted around the crossbowmen, rising the height of three men before spinning inwards. The crossbowmen died screaming, but I was not done. The circle kept spinning on itself, until I snapped my staff against the ground and it exploded outwards in a wave. I heard screaming from legionaries not mine as munitions began to explode, the brush burning bright as the wave of incineration continued outwards until it gutted. I breathed out, brow touched with sweat, and drew my sword. The animated corpses that'd been attacking us – vampires? – were retreating, I found. Half the Levantines that'd come with us were dead and Ishaq was bleeding from a bite mark on his face, but otherwise we'd made out decently.

Eye scanning the night, I found that in the hills there were glints of steel under moonlight. More legionaries. *Pulling back,*

I realized. And so were those that'd been fighting in the breach, though the Dominion pressed them close and the crossbowmen Juniper had sent took their toll. Maybe a fifth of those five hundred would make it out. But why were they retreating already? It made little sense. If they feared what I could do with the Night, why attack after nightfall in the first place? Feeling like I'd missed something I led us back to camp in a hurry. And there was something wrong, I noticed it immediately. Too many legionary tents were empty, and those that weren't were being brought down. Packed away.

I found Juniper and with her my answers. My marshal looked wretched. I thought it was a wound, at first, but her body was fine.

"She played us," Juniper got out, words tumbling out of her fanged mouth like a confession. "She left her camp, Cat. The Legions are marching on us right now, they're most the way across the valley, and we can't fight. Not with the entire Eleventh out in the hills waiting to flank us."

My fingers clenched.

"You're saying we need to retreat," I slowly said.

"We're in disarray, flanked and our camp fortifications are incomplete," the Hellhound said. "If we fight, we'll lose."

I rocked back in shock. She knew, and I *knew* she did, that a retreat at night with the enemy nipping at our heels was going to get bloody. Goblin skirmishers were going to scrape of our rearguard raw, and we'd be both slow and vulnerable on the move. That she was still arguing we needed to retreat could only mean that she was genuinely afraid that our army was going to get destroyed if we did not.

"Where would we even go?" I got out.

"Further north," she said. "Near the Jini Plateau, close to Nioqe Lake."

That wasn't a strategic position, I thought. Or even a tactical one. There were no real gains to be made by going there except not being crushed. That was how bad out situation had gotten. Numbly, I nodded my permission. I needed a drink, I thought, before we got going. Gods but my leg hurt.

I could not remember the last time we had been this brutally outmaneuvered.

—

We cut our losses and ran. It was not as hard a retreat as it could have been, Marshal Nim perhaps wary of engaging in a full pitched battle in the dark, but it cost us more than I cared to admit. As we fled I looked back and froze, for in the distance I saw the Black Knight's fortified camp was burning bright under the starry sky. It took me a moment to understand. Of course she was burning that camp. She no longer needed it, after all.

She'd just taken ours.

## Chapter 15: Pull

*"Only a child pretends there is value in defeat. Fool they who praise a bleeding wound."*

*– Dread Empress Massacre*

Since we'd come crashing down into this godforsaken region three days ago, we had lost one thousand six hundred and thirty-two soldiers.

The last count came in from the Dominion midmorning, as they were less used to counting their dead. The Levantines had borne the brunt of those losses, almost a quarter of the men they'd brought east now dead. In the exchange we'd killed maybe a quarter of that number in enemy soldiers, mostly through skirmishes that had gone our way. The best that could be said of the last few days was that we'd avoided a rout, not that this narrow avoidance meant our situation was anything less than terrible. We'd camped near the northern shore of Nioqe Lake, beyond the long shadows cast by the Jini Plateau, and while we were somewhat safe at the moment our strategic situation had taken a sharp turn for the worse.

The mood was grim when our war council assembled. The usual few slunk their way into the tent: Vivienne and Brandon Talbot, Juniper and Aisha, Zola Osei. Of the two lordlings only one showed today, Razin Tanja. Aquiline was attending to their captains, who were not pleased with the way this campaign was going. It'd not escaped anyone's attention that the Legions of Terror seemed to be focusing their efforts on the Dominion, which had brought old tensions to the fore – there was some talk in Levantine ranks of my Praesi legionaries being traitors, of there being some conspiracy afoot, and it needed to be stamped out. Aquiline tended to be more popular with their warriors, so it was only natural that we'd ended up with Razin.

"It is no longer feasible to take back our camp," General Zola crisply said. "I can only argue in favour of retreat now, west to the half-road and then further north to grounds less at our disadvantage."

"That marches us straight into the Gale Ribbon," Aisha said, shaking her head. "Even with wards prepared we'll take losses."

"We could attempt to take the burned camp in Moule Hills for our own," Brandon Talbot suggested.

"They'll have mined that," I grunted. "If not worse."

It was against Legion regulations to use devils but I wasn't sure how closely followed a rule that would be without my father around to enforce it. A lot of high-placed officers had shared his opinion, but many of those were now dead. I wasn't sure the Black Knight would push back if Malicia insisted, which she might. The Empress would prefer burning contracts to losing men, at this stage of the war.

"And even if we swing wide away from Kala Hills to avoid giving battle, there is nothing to stop her from simply marching down and getting into a position to flank us," Aisha said. "Lady Black has made it clear that she will not let us entrench."

"Is a ramp to access the plateau feasible?" Razin asked. "We could avoid the valley that so troubles us entirely by accessing the heights."

Looks were shared. That was the closest thing to a good idea we'd heard so far.

"I'll consult with Sapper-General Pickler," I said.

"Even if it is something our sappers can accomplish," General Zola began, "Marshal Nim will not leave us to build that ramp unmolested. We would need to stake out a more defensible position."

I glanced at Juniper, who sat at the other end of the table in silence. She had been following the conversation attentively, but there was a peculiar look on her face. She had not once opened her mouth to give an opinion this entire council and did not break the streak to answer Zola.

"Send out riders to find one," I ordered the general. "Even if Pickler says it can't be done, it'll be useful information to have under our belt."

"I will see to the roster," Aisha volunteered, smoothly rising to her feet.

She threw a worried glance at Juniper, who did not meet her eyes. The council ended without much ceremony, the tent emptying until there were only three people left: Vivienne, me and the still-silent Hellhound. Brushing back a strand that'd slipped her braid, the princess was the first to speak up.

"You haven't said a word all morning," Vivienne stated.

Juniper let out a long breath, chair creaking under her.

"I haven't," she said.

A moment passed. She did not continue.

"We've had setbacks before," I finally said. "And we're far from defeated, we just-"

"I should resign," the Hellhound interrupted me. "I can't, I know it would be a bad look in the middle of a campaign, but I should. Command should informally be passed to Zola regardless."

I balked.

"That's not even slightly a good idea," I said. "Zola's solid, but she doesn't have the spark. Nim will eat her alive."

Hakram had been right when he'd warned I should temper my expectations of Zola Osei, as he often was. Hune's replacement was not her equal, much less Juniper's. She was the kind of commander that made for a respectable general but fell short of marshal talents.

"Nim is eating *me* alive, in case you hadn't noticed," Juniper barked out. "How many times are you going to make excuses for me, Catherine? *I'm losing.*"

"I'm not making excuses," I flatly replied. "We've made some mistakes and paid for them but-"

"I should have asked you to send Named out in the hills, not just scouts," Juniper growled. "The Eleventh wouldn't have caught us out. The Order should have been out near the vanguard, not near the supply wagons – they could have chased Nim's horse *before* they shredded the Levantines."

"You're not an *oracle*, Juniper," I bit out. "We'd be having a very different conversation if she'd sent the horse after the wagons instead, and she might have attacked the moment we flushed out the Eleventh so-"

"I am not," Juniper of the Red Shields quietly said, "equal to this task."

I slammed my open palm onto the table.

"What the fuck is this?" I snarled. "She played her cards better, Juniper. We lost a few hands. So what? The goddamned pot is still on the table for anyone to take."

I heard her hands creak as large fingers tightened into fists.

"I'm not sure it all came back," Juniper hoarsely said. "After Malicia pulled her hooks. That I'm still *all* of me."

And just for that look in my friend's eyes, I wished I could kill Alaya of Satus twice.

"It did," I flatly said.

The Pilgrim had told me as much and I had no reason to doubt him. There'd been physical scars it would take her years to overcome, but her mind was fine.

"I will not be another orc cripple for you to lug about, Catherine," Juniper hissed. "Don't you see it's even worse if it's all there? It just means I was never in the same league. If I'm no longer fit, if I ever was in the first place, and-"

"Do you genuinely believe I wouldn't have advocated your removal if I believed you unfit for your office?"

Vivienne's voice cut through our rising anger like a knife. Juniper rocked back like she'd been slapped, but she was listening.

"Catherine loves you like family," Vivienne calmly continued. "She might excuse weakness out of sentiment. Would I, Hellhound? We have an understanding, but we both know I would not put you above Callowan lives."

"You're not a general," Juniper replied, but it was weak and by the tone of her voice she knew it.

She just wasn't convinced. Didn't want to be, maybe couldn't be. I grit my teeth. Though I was not unfamiliar with the flagellant's whip, this was not the time for my marshal to indulge in it. We were already in deep enough trouble without losing our finest military mind halfway through a campaign.

"Neither are you, at the moment," Vivienne evenly replied. "Perhaps you should attend to those duties before further defeat ensues, Marshal Juniper."

The orc's voice was stilted as she excused herself, almost fleeing the tent. I slumped back into my seat. Vivienne rose to pour two glasses of wine, pressing one into my hand.

"Fuck," I eloquently said.

It'd not been good in the first place, but I suspected I might have made it worse.

"I can't fix this," Vivienne told me. "It's not who we are to each other. She doesn't call me Warlord, or ever will."

I drank, biting down on my first answer. It was bitter enough on my tongue it almost spoiled the wine.

"I'm not sure how to fix this either," I said. "Winning? If we could beat Nim so easily we'd already be doing it."

"There are some who agree with her, you know," Vivienne murmured. "Not just our countrymen, who sometimes mutter for the wrong reasons. Officers that were brought in from the Legions. They say she came up too quick, more out of closeness to you than merit. That a few College tricks and being Istrid Knightsbane's daughter aren't enough to warrant her being raised so high."

I scoffed.

"I didn't pick her name out of a hat, Viv," I said. "Just yesterday she saved us a rout. How many officers would have figured out the Order needed to be sent to relieve us before the enemy cavalry even came out? It's not her that's the problem, it's that we're fighting the Legions of Terror on their picked grounds with the deck stacked in the favour. This was never going to be easy."

I'd ridden Legion war doctrine like a warhorse over the back of half the fucking continent. It wasn't going to stop being effective just because I wasn't the only one on the field using it.

"I know that," Vivienne said. "So do most people who matter."

My heiress paused, offering me a wan smile.

"Does Juniper?"

—

"You might as well be asking me to build a ramp to the moon," Pickler bluntly told me.

"I'm sure Ol' Sorcerous would appreciate the way down, but my ambitions are slightly more grounded," I easily replied.

Well, more or less. I only wanted to bind the entire continent to a treaty that would fundamentally change how Named would operate. You know, summer fair gift stuff.

"Funny," my Sapper-General said, tone dry as sand. "I can't do it, Catherine, at least not in the time you want it done. We didn't have the wood to build a ramp that size in the first place and we lost too many of our stakes when we abandoned the camp last night. Unless you want me to build it out of stone we cut from the cliffside, it can't be done."

I eyed her with alarm. I'd not known our situation was so bad with the *sudes*. If we lost too many of the large stakes my legionaries carried to easily raise palisades then we'd be dependent on local wood. Of which there wasn't much. The most we'd seen was the brushlands in the Kala Hills, which the Loyalist Legions now held.

"We can still raise palisades properly, can't we?" I asked.

"Camp size's been reduced. We're toeing the line for sanitation," Pickler admitted. "If not for the priests we'd be at risk of sicknesses."

Well, it'd been a day for pleasant surprises so far. Why break that lovely trend?

"We need to do *something*, Pickler," I got out.

"We're not reaching that plateau, Catherine," she said, then hesitated. "But I have an... idea. I need to look at some things first, though. See if it's truly viable."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"You're not going to give me more than that?"

"No point in raising false hopes," Pickler said. "I'll find you when I'm sure."

I was inclined to poke at her for at least a few scraps, but she was saved by the appearance of a phalange. The young Taghreb informed me that Archer was back in camp and she'd brought a package with her, which spurred my curiosity. I met with Vivienne as I limped my way back, as she'd been sent for too, the pair of us entering the tent together to the sight of Archer dumping a large cloth sack on the carved table. I paused.

"Is whatever's in that bag breathing?" I bluntly asked.

"I would hope so," Vivienne said. "That's one of the abduction bags for the Jacks, if she got blood all over it I'll be cross."

Ah, Vivienne. Sometimes she said these things and I acutely felt the loss it was for my gender that she was only interested in the other one.

"Why, hello Archer," Indrani brightly said. "Lovely to see you, how did your night go?"

I raised my staff then poked experimentally at the bag, ignoring her entirely.

"I think it's a person," I mused.



"She might have finally snapped and done in Masego," Vivienne suggested. "There's only so many times a woman can have her words nitpicked before blood ensues."

"If you don't stop I'll put him back where I found him," Indrani threatened.

I had to bite down on a 'Masego? It'd be a walk, but I suppose you could' that very much wanted to wriggle its way past my lips. It was rare that I got to gang up on one of the Woe instead of getting ganged up on, so it was only with reluctance that I moved on to business.

"And where would that be?" I asked.

Theatrically, Archer opened the bag to reveal the bruised face of an unconscious dark-skinned man in what I'd guess to be his early twenties.

"Kala Fortress," Indrani said. "You're looking at Sokoro Abara, third child of Lord Abara of Kala. Caught him while he was serving as a go-between between the fortress and the Legions."

My brow rose. That was quite the catch. More than enough to make up for her absence last night, considering she wouldn't have made much of a difference in the fight. I stayed silent a little longer, choosing my words.

"I know that look," Indrani accused. "I did good but you want to insult me anyways so you're moving around the sentence."

"Of course not," I lied.

"You did good, Archer," Vivienne told her with a warm smile.

Indrani preened.

"You know," my successor casually added, "for a sullen wench."

I grinned even as wails of Callowan treachery began filling up the tent, already thinking about all the answers we were going to get out of that man.

—

Sokoro Abara was going to be a hard nut to crack, I figured.

Akua had once told me that a lot of Wasteland nobles trained their children in methods to resist torture and in my experience Praesi aristocrats needed to be made brutally aware that their situation was desperate before the veneer of arrogance even began to break. So we did the works: put him in a tent enchanted for darkness with the sole magelight facing him, had the Concocter feed him something to keep him slightly dazed and I handled the

interrogation personally with only Vivienne at my side. Sokoro Abara woke up, blinking away the sleep, and then took in the sight of my being seated across from him and Vivienne standing behind me.

There was a pregnant pause.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," he swore.

Well. I was feeling a little cheated, but there was a saying about gift horses. The young noble was quite frank about how he was not even slightly interested in dying or being tortured for his family's sake, and instead offered information quite freely when asked. His position as the envoy between the fortress and Legions – he informed us quite bitterly that such a task had of course been *beneath* his elder half-siblings – and his confessed tendency to open sealed scrolls to read them meant he'd been in a good position to learn about the unfolding debacle.

"The Eleventh was in the hills for two days before you marched there," he told us. "They went through Risas, using the shepherd paths. The Black Knight wanted them in position to strike at your army from behind should you fight in the valley."

It was an odd feeling to know that our disastrous vanguard action had still been better than the likely alternative: picking a fight with Marshal Nim in the valley and getting smashed in the back by a full legion. Though it'd been a costly thing to learn that General Lucretia was hiding in the hills, better we learn it now than when a battle was on the line. He also had actionably useful information, of the recent kind.

"Lady Black ordered that the wells to both the east and west of the Kala Hills should be poisoned today," Sokoro told us. "She had to ask us permission first, as it is still father's land, but he bent over backwards to agree. Lady Warlock has offered to broker entering under Wolof's protection on very favourable terms, so there's little he won't do to please her."

My lips thinned. I could deduce why Marshal Nim would give the order easily enough. She wanted us to be stuck near Nioqe Lake, knowing that if we strayed too far from those shores we'd have no water source to draw from. Now that the Black Knight had put us in a corner, she meant for us to stay there.

"What do you know of Marshal Nim's plans?" Vivienne asked.

"Not much," Sokoro admitted. "She was raised under the Carrion Lord, you know. Like all his old soldiers she has high-handed manners even in the lands of her betters."

I doubted this man was Nim's better in any possible sense of the word – except passing through small doorways, maybe? – but I'd gain nothing from telling him that.

"Not much is still *something*," I smiled.

He smiled back and asked for assurances about his captivity. I guaranteed him absence of torture and fair treatment if he talked – which he already had, but apparently did not know – yet when I offered right of ransom he scoffed.

"Father won't pay," Sokoro said. "I'd rather you promise wine instead, I imagine being a prisoner will be dreadfully dull."

"We can arrange that," Vivienne promised.

'Not much' hadn't been him playing coy, unfortunately. He'd overheard useful bits but no plan. Nim's legionaries were apparently convinced that she wanted to avoid giving us a pitched battle, which I had no trouble believing. The most interesting morsel was that apparently General Wheeler had been asked about raising field fortifications that would hem in the Army of Callow around Nioqe Lake. It was not a sure thing, but in my opinion it seemed likely she actually intended to try. Malicia did not want to wreck my army, just put me in a position where I was forced to negotiate. Bottled up against the shores of the lake with a larger force or impassable terrain encircling me as my supplies ran out would achieve that.

The best possible outcome of being forced into that corner was managing a stalemate until Sepulchral and the Rebel Legions arrived, but I had my doubts we'd manage as much. Besides, if it was the fight Marshal Nim was after then it was the last one we wanted to give her. Which meant moving before we got cornered.

Time to see if Pickler had a way for us to slip the noose before it got tightened.

—

"I told you that I can't get us on that plateau," Pickler hissed out in irritation.

"But you have something else," I pressed.

"It's a gamble," my Sapper-General admitted. "But I believe it'll work."

She showed me to the inside of a tent where a tenth of sappers were chattering away as they worked, cutting away at wood and hammering in nails. It took me a moment to realize what I was looking at: one of our supply wagons, stripped of its wheels and bound tighter. Was that wax I was smelling?

"I can't get you on the plateau," Pickler repeated, standing at my side. "But there's another way east. Nioqe Lake."

"You want to make a pontoon bridge across," I realized, then frowned. "We have enough wood?"

"If we use every supply wagon," she replied. "And a significant portion of our stakes."

She'd not been underselling it when she'd called that a gamble, then. If the enemy sunk that bridge, or even just prevented us from recovering it after we crossed, we'd be in heaps of trouble. As in, might seriously have to consider cutting a deal trouble: without wagons to carry our supplies we'd slow to a crawl even using roads. Out there on wild land, where there weren't any, we'd be snails to the Black Knight's hawk.

"How long would it take you to get it done?" I asked.

"We made a pattern, so I could have it ready for deployment by sundown if you don't steal any of my sappers," Pickler said. "Trouble is, Catherine, I don't have a way to prevent *them* seeing us make it."

Which would allow Nim to contest the crossing, the last thing I wanted. I clenched my fingers then unclenched them. There was a way. I didn't like using it as a ploy, it felt disrespectful, but I'd do it anyway. The question was, then whether it was truly our way out. Sure, it'd get us out of Marshal Nim's planned encirclement and on the other side of the lake if things went fine. What would we *do* once there, though? Taking a gamble to flee blindly was exactly the kind of mistake the Black Knight was waiting to capitalize on. She'd pushed her army hard, striking at us repeatedly over the same day and night, because she knew that our officer corps and general staff were of lesser quality than hers. We were, as an army, simply more prone to making mistakes when time grew short.

That was the difference training made.

The way I saw it, the point of crossing Nioqe Lake would be marching south afterwards. I'd been Juniper's original plan to do as much, if from a significantly better position, and I still believed it was a sound notion. The problem now was Kala Fortress. It was a certainty the Loyalist Legions would move to cover it faster than we could get there – needing to fish out and rebuild our supply wagons ensured as much – so Nim was likely to entrench by the walls. That'd been true in the original iteration of the Hellhound's plan as well, but our answer to that had simply been going around the Legions by marching further east before cutting south. That was no longer an option, because as I'd recently learned from our prisoner the Black Knight had ordered all the wells east of Kala Hills *poisoned*.

I wasn't sure how far that order would be applied in practice but given that Nim had light cavalry to spare I wouldn't bet on it being a small slice of land. We could last maybe two weeks without refreshing our water supplies if we began rationing immediately and nothing went wrong, which made risking an eastern march rolling the dice. If we got lucky it might rain and be the drinkable kind of rain instead of the brimstone kind that burned – a legitimate worry in these parts, Aisha had informed me – but that was a large *if*. Especially when the mage cadres of the Loyalist Legions had shown they were capable of large-scale weather manipulation rituals. Even if rainstorms gathered, there was nothing to prevent the Legions from just dispersing them.

No, the reliable water was south and down the half-road. And there was a set of fortifications on top of that road: Kala Fortress. If we could take it before Nim got there, we'd be in a very defensible position and sitting over *her* supply line. We'd be putting her in a corner instead of the other way around. I could maybe sneak a small force to that keep before the Black Knight got there, I finally thought, but nowhere large enough to actually take a well-defended castle. Which meant I needed to figure out how to bust open that lock before we got started on this plan.

"Catherine?" Pickler hesitantly asked.

I *had* gone silent for a long while, I supposed. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Taking Kala Fortress wasn't really the issue, was it? As in, it did not need to be in the Army of Callow's possession. I just needed it not to be in the hands of the Loyalist Legions. And *that* was something I might just have the tool to achieve.

"Get started on the work," I said, then bit my tongue. "Talk to Juniper and General Zola first, but you have my full backing for this. Unless they object stridently, it's happening."

Leaving her quite bemused at the sudden turn, I set to talking around the key to the lock.

—

Sokoro Abara widely smiled, showing slightly yellowing teeth. His breath smelled like the wine we'd promised him and Vivienne had evidently delivered on.

"I do have some friends behind the walls, Your Majesty," he said. "Though it behooves me to ask why I should introduce them to you. I am, after all, a prisoner."

"You misunderstand me," I said.

He flinched, as if preparing for a blow, but none followed.

"There would be no need for an introduction, as you would be the one speaking to them," I idly continued.

His eyes narrowed.

"You'd release me?" he asked.

"Release is a strong word," I thinly smiled. "Tell me, Sokoro, how would you like to be Lord of Kala?"

He stayed silent a moment, considering. If the Army of Callow put him in that seat Malicia might take offence in the aftermath should she beat us, but that was a relatively distant concern. He could place himself under a High Seat's protection should he grow too worried of retribution.

"Part of the castle and the soldiers would back me over my siblings," Sokoro finally said, tone even. "Not over my father. He is a well-respected man. I also have... concerns about my mother's safety."

"Your father is an eminently mortal man," I said. "And we can whisk away your mother before we strike."

Scribe had gotten to make her latest Assassin. We'd use it. The dark-skinned man's eyes brightened at my words. It was what he'd wanted to hear. Wasn't like he was ever going to rise high except through my good graces: everything he'd said about his half-siblings implied a degree of enmity. He might get cast out after the death of Lord Abara, and that was assuming none in the castle decided to... err on the side of caution.

"And what would you have of me in return?" he asked.

"All I want is a friend ruling that fortress," I smiled. "Perhaps your help in learning the lay of the land. Nothing onerous."

He looked hesitant. Right, Praesi. I'd get more trust out of him if I bled him some.

"Full use of your water is what I want most, of course," I said. "I'll not require your soldiers to fight by the side of the Army of Callow."

"I might be amenable to such an arrangement," Sokoro Abara lightly said.

"Good," I smiled, and to his alarm the darkness began thickening around us.

Faint sounds could be heard, almost like cawing, and my smile broadened.

"I'll want an oath out of you, my friend," I said. "Just in case, you see. Trust is hard come by in these troubled times."

"It is only natural," he stiffly replied. "On what would you have me swear?"

Night began filling the room, Sve Noc granting this a sliver of their attention, and I answered him.

—

In a ring outside our camp, one thousand six hundred and thirty-two corpses were dragged out on the plains and assembled in great piles. Mages came out in lines, setting fire to them with what little wood we could spare for this — which wasn't much. As a result they had to stay and keep feeding more mageflame to the dead bodies, which took powerful flames to burn. The result was plumes of thick, guttering smoke that rose up into the afternoon sky. Enough of them that it was as if a curtain had been pulled in front of the camp.

Pickler's sappers had their cover.

Meanwhile I set about giving the enemy something to react to, instead of leaving them to operate unhindered. I first picked a place on open grounds with a good view at the Black Knight's fortified camp. Hierophant came with me, in expectation of the enemy's answer, and the two of us stood out like black-plumed birds out on the rocky plains. A bodyguard of twenty knights had ridden with us, but I'd refused more. There would be no point. I took the lead, pulling down my hood and beginning to murmur under the pounding sun. Night was like a lazy brat refusing to get up, but I had time to spare. I coaxed it out properly and the Sisters helped me with the alignment. Zeze could have done it through the Observatory, but I wanted him free to act.

The same ring of red light as last night appeared over our heads, but I'd told Masego to leave it. No need to warn the enemy of his presence too early. Once I'd gathered the power to me, though, I told him to get ready.

"I am all eyes, Catherine," he replied.

High above the enemy camp I ripped open a gate into Arcadia. There was a reason we'd not tried to keep moving through the faerie realm after being stranded: out here it was a nightmarish mirror of the Wasteland. Impossible storms that toppled mountains, landslides that charged like armies and rains that drew furrows in the ground. That was without even getting into the... fauna. Maybe a few Named could slip through, but entire companies? It'd be madness to even try. There was no lack of water, though, and that was what I'd been after. After a few

heartbeats a flood began pouring, just in time for power to begin rising in the enemy camp.

Time to see what Akua had cooked up to handle my signature trick. I let out a startled snort when, instead of some fancy spell, what appeared was instead another gate. About the same size and placed below mine, like a bucket for the flood to be poured into. Well, that was certainly a solution. Nice sorcery, it'd be a shame if something happened to it.

"Zeze?" I asked.

"**Wrest**," Hierophant replied, and the world rippled.

The enemy gate rippled but did not break. I saw Masego frown and dimly felt power bloom in the distance again.

"Clever mage," Hierophant murmured. "They are feeding the gate further magic so that I cannot fully wrest it-"

"Keep them stuck, then," I grunted.

I was not without tricks of my own. My gate began to pull together, like a ball of twine being rolled up, and the flood of water ended. But with a grunt of effort I dragged the 'twine' to the side and down, only to begin unfolding it again. Sweat soaked my back and the gate was noticeably smaller than my first, but before long the flood began pouring again. About a hundred feet above Loyalist Legion camp, it hit transparent panes of sorcery. They buckled but held. Water began sliding down, revealing the broad shape of a dome. Masego tutted.

"The structure is too simple, Sahelian," he said. "Here is why we want more intricate escapements."

His hand whipped out, the ripples of his aspect strengthening, and the enemy gate blew up in blinding flash of light. The air thrummed with power as there was a sound of thunder, the enchantment protecting the camp shivering – and, in patches, failing. I'd kept my gate opened, and like an avalanche of bricks the water fell down on the enemy through a doze holes. Mages patched up the hole quick enough with shields, but not before we did some damage. I kept the gate open as long as I could, Hierophant swatting down a few other attempts to block it, but their mages were focusing on protection so there was no further break.

Didn't matter. I'd got what I came for: I'd rattled their cage and something else they'd not notice until it was too late.

"The angle for your adjusted gate was far from the best you could have used," Masego noted. "Too much to the east of the camp."



"I aimed at what I wanted, don't you worry about it," I smiled.

I'd emptied half a lake on the eastern part of the camp, and though it'd rolled off the dome the important part was *where* it'd rolled off. Into Kala Hills, into the same paths the Eleventh had used to attack us last night. The same that Nim might be tempted to use as a shortcut to attack us when we crossed the lake.

Now they were a mess of mud and water, impossible to march an army through for at least a few days.

—

We launched a night attack.

It was the best way to cover our crossing, General Zola said. Marshal Juniper did not object. Five thousand of the Army of Callow and a thousand Levantine skirmishers marched out, every Named at hand save for me going with them. They were to shake the enemy and then retreat, actually fighting as little as possible. I even poured Night into a trinket and left it for Hierophant to wield: that ring of red light was a good way to feign my presence where I wasn't. The Loyalist Legions would be very wary of attacking me after dark now that I'd had some time to prepare.

It was nerve-wracking to watch them march out without going with them, but I had other duties. Sokoro Abara was put on a horse and we kept our most mobile force in reserve: the moment the pontoon bridge was finished, the Order of the Broken Bells would ride across in full force. The knights were our change to get to Kala Fortress before the Black Knight could, much as they might be needed in the small battle about to take place in the plains.

It took hours, to my rising restlessness, before the bridge was done. We didn't wait until it was; as soon as Pickler told me they'd reached the shallows on the other side, I saddled up and led the Order across. There'd been no news about the battle in the plains yet. We rode through the shallow water and then up the beach, the townsfolk of Risas barring their gates and hiding as we rode past. After that, the hasty ride in the dark was surprisingly boring. Sometimes a horse fell and a knight had to pull back and change their mount, but otherwise we went untroubled.

We rode down the eastern length of the Kala Hills, then swung around west to approach the keep itself. We rested the horses before coming into sight, not only to allow the beasts to catch their breath. Scribe and her almost-Named had come through for me: waiting for us in a fold of the rocks was Sokoro Abara's mother, as I'd promised. I gave him a moment to reassure her — and confirm through someone he trusted we truly had assassinated his father — and then we saddled up again.

Kala Fortress was a grim old thing propped up against the side of the eponymous hills, with tall and thick wall of stones surrounding the small town at the bottom of a squat castle. Sokoro went in ahead with Assassin secretly shadowing him and contacted his partisans. There was some violence before they seized control of the outer gates, but once they were swung open my knights flooded into the town. We struck quick enough the castle gates were overridden before they could be closed, and with Sokoro serving as our emissary a surrender was not overly difficult to secure.

I had to blow up his sister's head, she was the fight-to-the-end type, but the sight of that cooled ardours among the hardliners. Within the hour he was Lord Sokoro Abara and his half-brother in a cell, which was when I finally left out a breath of relief. Our part of this, at least, had gone well. It was past Early Bell, but we'd taken the fortress. Now all we could do was *wait*.

I got the news in waves. The first rider was sent by Juniper once the force we'd sent to stir up Nim had begun to retreat. The skirmishing had gone well and it looked like the Black Knight had preferred marching out with her full strength arrayed rather than pursuing us half-baked. She must have thought we were baiting her into a trap. The second rider informed me that the Loyalist Legions had sent out their entire horse to harass us when they'd realized we had raised a pontoon bridge but that our rearguard was holding. The crossing had begun and it was expected that the Army of Callow would be across before the enemy infantry arrived.

The third rider wasn't from Juniper at all, it was from the Black Knight. We caught the man and killed him, but all it'd do was slow the realization that we were now at her back. The fourth rider brought harsher news: the enemy cavalry had set fire to the pontoon bridge before the last of my men crossed, leaving three companies stranded on the wrong side of the lake. General Zola had ordered them to surrender, which they had. The rest of the Army of Callow, however, had crossed. A detachment would stay to try to salvage as much of the bridge as possible, but the march to Kala had begun. The Black Knight sent a pair of companies to check the fortress, in the hours after, but I sallied with the Order and rode them down.

There were no survivors and Marshal Nim did not try us again.

By dawn my army was camped beneath the walls of Kala Fortress, the few sappers Pickler had been able to spare looking into setting up defensive positions. By Morning Bell our supplies had caught up. By Noon Bell horns sounded to call the beleaguered Army of Callow to fighting positions, because our forward elements had brought word: the Loyalist Legions had formed a battle line in the valley and were now beginning to march towards

us. Lady Black had decided she'd rather fight than let herself be cornered.

An hour past Noon Bell, as I sat on Zombie's back, I looked at the retreating Loyalist Legions and laughed until my belly hurt. It wasn't us that'd given them pause, no. We were in good battle order, ready to receive them, but it was a banner that'd done the trick. Atop Moule Hills, on Nim's left flank, a banner had been raised: a vulture cradling a white skull, with green and yellow lines emanating from it. And under the colours horse and infantry stood, poised on the heights and looking down at us.

Sepulchral's vanguard had arrived even earlier than expected, and now everyone's plans were merrily burning under the afternoon sun.

## Interlude: North I

*"You cannot flee from fate, it is the road beneath your feet."*

*– Levantine saying*

The grass was coated with dust, blown in from a southern storm. It made for slippery footing and that was Borghold Bluesmile had tried her luck: she'd thought the dust would make it harder on his prosthetic leg. As if Masego would ever make such shoddy work. Hakram slapped away the other orc's axe with his own, nimbly letting her pass by him, then flipped it in his hand and tapped her shoulder with the butt from behind. There was raucous laughter from the circle of warriors around them, fists thundering against shields. It'd been an insult to hold back the blow, a sign of disdain.

Adjutant had implied he was teaching a child, not duelling an equal.

"You fucking tame dog," Borghold furiously snarled, turning around. "Servant to wallerspawn, whore for-"

She struck at him when he took a step forward, hard and blind, but he didn't even bother to avoid it. He adjusted the angle of his steel limb, let the blow bounce off, and his dead hand snatched her throat. He squeezed hard enough the insults replaced by a gurgling choke, raising her high enough her feet left the ground. He met her eyes with his own, patient, and let the fear seep in. Then his bony fingers *tightened*, a hard warning, and he dropped her. Borghold fell in a sprawl, coughing spittle through her blue-painted teeth.

"Howling at the moon doesn't turn a hound into a wolf," Hakram snorted, then spat to the side.

Fists on shields, the sound drowning out even his opponent's coughing. He did not bother to help her up, as he had some other foes. The Brass Wings Clan was no enemy of his, this was not a test or declaration of enmity. Borghold Bluesmile had just wanted to raise her reputation as a champion by bloodying him in the wake of so many more famous names failing. Hakram left the circle, shields parting for him but even as a few eager young greenhorns sought to offer him celebratory aragh he caught sight of a man waiting for him.

There were few orcs as tall as Hakram and even fewer still that were taller, but Oguz the Lamé was one of them. Juniper's father had been known as Oguz Sharphand once, one of the most famous champions of the Steppes until both his legs were broken in a fall. Even with a shaman's attention they'd never healed quite right, ending the warrior's stride just as he hit his pride. Still, he'd kept the edge he'd had when he'd given Grem One-Eye his sobriquet and served as the chief of the Red Shields in all but names for decades while General Istrid served in the Legions.

He'd been proclaimed her successor, after her death, which Hakram counted as a blessing. Oguz the Lamé made as useful an ally as dangerous he would have made an enemy. Adjutant drank a mouthful of aragh, slapping the stripling's shoulder in thanks as he returned the skin and heading straight for the chieftain before warriors could try to rope him into a bout of celebratory drinking. Oguz, leaning on his slender blackwood stick, eyed Borghold with scorn.

"Kids," Oguz the Lamé rumbled, shaking his head. "There are times to make a reputation. A *taratoplu* is not one of them."

It was an old term, that one. In translation it would mean truce-gathering but that would be missing a crucial nuance. In Old Kharsum, what the clans of the far north still called the noble tongue, *taratoplu* was the first of a pair of bond-words. The second was *ordutoplu*, which meant camp-gathering. The Miezens had only ever bothered to learn the first and in their records they'd matched it to one of their own words after unwarrantedly making it a masculine: *turbelus*. *Horde*, in Lower Miezan. Though it had been laziness that'd led the conquerors to make that mistake, they'd stumbled into a partial truth. *Taratoplu* was as day to the night of *ordutoplu*, the gathering under truce meant to lead to the making of a great war camp.

Not even when the Steppes had been filled with talk of breaking ties with Ater under Grem One-Eye had a *taratoplu* been called. If the tales were to be believed, none had been called since the day the Broken Antler Horde was smashed into dust.

"We are what we are," Hakram grunted back.

The older orc scoffed.

"They put too much in your heads, at the Carrion Lord's college," Oguz said. "Too many words meaning too little. The Blackspears aren't wrong about that, even if they're the bloody vulture whoresons."

"The Blackspears would sell a wolf to a goat and boast of it," Hakram snorted.

A favorite expression of his mother's, implying terrible bad faith and shamelessness.

"And it's serving them well," Oguz the Lamé replied, sucking at his fangs in displeasure. "Walk with me, Deadhand."

Around the tall walls of the fortress of Chagoro, a sea of tents had spread out. Once the great warring clans had called a truce and gathered for talks, the others had flocked from all over the Steppes. Even some of the faraway clans who'd only ever known the Golden Bloom and other orcs had come, drawn by the rumours of a Horde gathering in the south. Never had Hakram ever seen so many of his people in one place: over two hundred banners reached for the sky, more than a hundred thousand orcs swarming under them. Not all warriors, but many. Hard to find out numbers when the camp was violent mayhem, not a semblance of organization to it.

Just finding your way to where you needed to go was a struggle: there was a reason the talks between the clans were held within the fortress, none allowed to set tents within.

"The Winter Hooves changed sides," Oguz briskly said. "Their champions now drink with Troke's and swear his fights will be theirs."

Troke Snaketooth, chieftain of the Blackspears, was proving to be a problem. Hakram had not anticipated that the man would be so able at making allies, much less as ambitious as he was proving to be. The man had ridden the story of being the maker of this truce to greater influence, painting his greatest rivals – the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves – as warmongers who would rob all the Clans of the wealth of the south. Worse, his deeper game was only now starting to emerge. There had been no chief that could unite enough of the clans to have a claim at being acclaimed Warlord, not even Troke whose clans still had many enemies, but the Snaketooth had traded axe for arrow. He had put it to the clans that, in the Praesi way, a High Lord of the Steppes should be elected to lead the Clans into war south. Avoiding the title of Warlord, couching it all in terms of *Praesi* authority, had made the affair more palatable to clans who would have balked at proclaiming a Blackspears their Warlord.

Many had taken up the banner in the weeks since. Too many, and more were rallying by the day.

"The Winter Hooves were friends to the Howling Wolves," Hakram quietly rumbled. "What changed?"

"They were friends to Grem One-Eye," Oguz corrected. "They wanted him as Warlord, in the old days. Now there is no getting him back: even if the Tower returns him, how are we to be sure it is not just some creature riding his skin?"

There was an undertone of relish to the other orc's word at the ruin of his old foe's reputation, Hakram noted. That enmity had never quite faded, not helped by the old rumours that Grem was Juniper's true father. Empty words, as far as Adjutant knew, but it was too tasty a slander not to be kept moving from mouth to ear.

"You're saying they care more about the throne than who sits it," he slowly said.

"Talk about thrones and you'll get your throat ripped out," Oguz warned. "But they're looking for a stallion to ride, that much is true, and Troke's the one prancing. They're not the only ones, Deadhand. Praes is looking ripe but no one wants to try the Tower without a firm axehand to follow."

*On Rule*, the fascinating treatise on politics that so many Procerans treated as a second Book of All Things, described this very phenomenon. *In times of crisis, it wrote, authority will move from the periphery to the centre. In times of plenty, it will move from the centre to the periphery.* Hakram had seen it unfold with his own eyes, the way a parade of enemies had pushed Callow deeper and deeper into Catherine's embrace. Now, to his displeasure, he was seeing an opponent sail the same current. Clans would back Troke Snaketooth not because they were ardent supporters but because he was looking like the rising candidate.

The deed wasn't done, though. And Troke had made that old and most unforgiving of Wasteland mistakes: you never wanted to be the one looking closest to claiming the Tower until you were ready to actually take it.

"The Hooves will bring over maybe three clans with them," Hakram said. "That brings Troke to over sixty backers, by my count."

"Just about," Oguz said. "If he gets to eighty the tide will carry him over, mark my words. No one wants to be the last to proclaim a Warlord."

That Troke would be High Lord of the Steppes instead would matter not a bit in practice, Hakram knew. Once he was in the chair, people would obey. It was what orcs *did* when someone was raised above. The Blackspear clan would make promises of lesser authority, of limits and restraint, but the moment Troke Snaketooth had a few victories under his belt he'd begin taking

it back. And the Clans would let him, so long as he kept their axes red and their bellies full.

"Sixty is enough that the Weeping Arrows will be scared," Hakram said. "They're going to start bleeding clans and Inge Farsight knows if she drops under forty she's done. She'll negotiate now."

"You want us to back her?" Oguz said, tone unconvinced. "Dag is still our man."

"Unless you want your clan to serve as Troke's footrest for the next twenty years, you don't really have a choice," Hakram bluntly replied. "Dag's a hawk with lead wings, Grem's cousin or not. He's a solid champion but he's not even chief to the Howling Wolves."

The Howling Wolves clan was still led by Grem One-Eye, who they refused to name dead, though in practice much like the Red Shields had spent the last two decades led by Oguz in his wife's name Dag Clawtoe had led the Howling Wolves as chief in all but name for his cousin.

"That lot is prickly," Oguz warned. "They won't like going from rider to wolf."

"So we marry Dag to Inge," Hakram said.

"She killed her last husband," Oguz the Lamé flatly replied.

"I'm sure Dag will enjoy the challenge," Adjutant lied.

It needed to be done. The alliance between the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields was holding steady at forty clans but it'd not grown in days. Dag was respected but seen more a steward than a lord, to use Callowan parlance, and Oguz couldn't be put forward because no one would follow a cripple. Their clans were by far the two largest of their alliance, and the warriors would not hear of putting forward the chief of a weaker clan as the figurehead for the alliance. Hakram knew there was no point in forcing the matter. Even if it worked, challenges would see the chief slain by his own allies before the day was out.

The bloody Blackspears were making gains, in large parts due to the skilled diplomacy of their Split Tree Clan allies. Hakram had been somewhat disposed to making peace with their ascension, as his and Catherine's plans did not necessarily require the Wolves or the Shields to be raised as the highest of the clans, but Troke's plans were a problem. The Snaketooth did intend to burn a swath through the lands of Okoro, but he'd called it madness to try the walls of a well-armed and forewarned High Seat. He had promised instead to keep raiding southwards, towards Nok.

Whose defences had been weakened by an Ashuran sack and who had sent many troops out west to fight with Sepulchral.

No doubt it was just happenstance that such an attack would cripple a rebellion against the very same woman who'd raised Troke to the rank of Lord of the Steppes and might just make her inclined to confirm him as High Lord of Steppes should the war end in her favour. Most of the Clans didn't give a shit about that, though. What they saw was that Troke wanted to take them after a softer but still rich target, which was a pleasant song to the ear of many.

"I fucking doubt that, boy," Oguz snorted. "But let's ask him."

Dag did not, in fact, enjoy the notion of that challenge. Hakram sold him on it anyway by pointing out that if he wed Inge Farsight even should his cousin return to become chieftain of the Howling Wolves he'd still have a high position as husband to the High Lady – or Warlord, depending on how things fell out – of the Steppes. Ambitious bastard, Dag, though personal loyalty to his famous cousin had kept that in check. A chance to step out of Grem One-Eye's shadow, though, was not an opportunity to be lost. All that remained was selling to Inge and the Weeping Arrows.

She'd see reason, Hakram thought. Like most of the prominent chiefs, she had to know that food was beginning to run out. The countryside had already been stripped bare, Okoro no longer sent patrols that could be slain to eat and the clans had brought only so many herd with them to butcher for meat. Much as the chiefs would like to argue forever, someone would need to be acclaimed in Chagoro before the month was out or simple hunger would force the gathering to disperse.

Within moments of getting to the great tent of the Weeping Arrows, Hakram found trouble. Trouble looked back at him with a come-hither glare, going by the name of Sigvin of the Split Tree Clan. One of the twins that'd come as speakers for their clan to Wolof, Hakram had gotten to know her better since. She had these long fangs and wore tunics that prominently displayed ritual scarring on her shoulders, and Hakram had always had a weakness for dangerous women. It'd only made the fucking better to know that they both knew she was trying to turn him to her side, which might have been while they'd kept doing it.

Not that hers was the only bed he'd rolled in. Being the first Named of his kind in centuries and an unbroken streak of duelling victories had made Hakram a desirable orc. He wasn't one to say no when the question was asked right.

Sigvin was leaning against a marking post outside the tent. Inside was a lot of shouting, not a pot he wanted to dip a toe hastily, so he came to lean on the other side of the post. Silence held between them, Hakram pricking an ear to try to



discern what was happening in the Weeping Arrow tent. Names were being shouted, but also oaths and insults.

"If I didn't know better," Adjutant said, "I'd say it sounds like the acclamation of a chief, in there."

The early part of it, at least.

"You haven't heard?" Sigvin said, flaring her teeth provocatively at him. "Inge Farsight got killed. Some feud with a Black Tongue champion that went hard."

The Black Tongue weren't backers to Troke Snaketooth, from what Hakram recalled. At least not officially. How many knives like that had the Blackspears kept in wait?

"No telling who they'll raise now," Hakram said.

Inge had led the clan almost twenty years but had no clear successor. Those kinds of acclamations always got messy and often left clans divided in their wake.

"Except that it won't be Inge Farsight," Sigvin laughed.

She met his eyes boldly.

"One step behind, Deadhand," she said. "Might be time for you and your queen to talk with Snaketooth instead of keeping lead weights on your feet."

Swift as a doe, she pushed away from her side of the post and swatted at his buttocks.

"Don't worry," Sigvin said, "I'll not kick you out of my bedroll even after you lose. It'd be a waste."

Hakram took the time to enjoy the sway as she strolled away, for he was only mortal, but as soon as she was gone he turned cold eyes to the tent. That was a setback. The Weeping Arrows were done, their alliance would collapse. The practical thing would be to take the offered branch the Blackspears had sent through Sigvin and have private talks with Troke. He would only pull further ahead in the coming days, and even if he couldn't be turned against Malicia he still needed to be sounded out over... other matters. As the Adjutant, that was his duty. Much as it irked to have been outplayed, he had been. Now he needed to make sure Catherine's plans were not too heavily damaged. Yet Hakram found his feet refusing to move. He thought, suddenly, of Scribe. Of the look she'd had on her face, that night he had taken her by the throat with a ghostly hand he could no longer make. How the glint in her eyes had scared him for the way he could so easily understand it. He looked down.

The grass at his feet was coated in dust, blown in from a southern storm. Tricky footing.

Just a few more steps, he decided.

—

The night sky would have been beautiful, were it not for the plumes of foul smoke clawing across it. The Dead King's devilish machine, the dragon-furnace that had been meant to incinerate the armies that'd held Hainaut, had not ceased burning after being toppled. Miles of land had turned into a sea of fire as black pitch spread, and though the fuel was running out it was as if a curtain of black and pungent smoke had been drawn across the world. The kind of sight that would make men mutter about the end of the world, had they not already all known it had arrived.

"In Ashur, Speakers do not like to deal in simple truths," Hanno of Arwad said. "Simplicity is a brittle thing, they claim. What lessons they have to share, they prefer to share through stories. To let us find our own meanings."

"I hatred riddles," Rafaella admitted. "And poems. Even Hidden Poets. Words trying to get clever."

Hanno shifted in his seat, wincing as the bandages pulled tight against his wound. The priests had seen to his impalement as best they could but the enchantment on the Revenant's spear had fought the Light. It would be days before he was truly fit to fight again.

"Cleverness isn't the point," he told his old friend. "It is a mark of respect, I always thought. A recognition that few truths are true for all."

"Stories not about truth," the Valiant Champion chided him. "They about glory and sex. And killing. Sometimes Gods, but mostly other three."

He chuckled.

"But you can speaking bad Ashur story," Rafaella allowed. "I am best of friends, will pretend to listen."

"Convincingly?" he teased.

"Am not that best a friend," Rafaella replied without batting an eye.

But he knew her enough to see she was curious, under the ribbing, so Hanno idly thumbed the stumps of his missing fingers and chose his words.

"There is one that I cannot seem to shake, lately," he admitted. "It is a story about the Patient Man."

"He villain?" Rafaela asked interestedly.

"I am not sure," Hanno murmured. "Which I suppose is the point."

In the distance, red lightning crackled across the sky. The aftermath of Antigone's duel with the Archmage had left great scars on an already devastated land: power still lashed out wildly where they had clashed.

"In the far land across the sea, in the city of Akra, there was once a Patient Man," Hanno said. "He was a man of faith and wisdom, who had grown wealthy before retiring and raising his two daughters. In time Akra went to war with the city of Yane, and so his eldest asked his blessing to fight. The Patient Man hesitated, for war is a dangerous trade and he did not want her to perish but neither did he want to shame the courage that made him proud. Knowing not which was the just course, he kept silent."

The cadence came back to him easily, tradertalk having enough of High Tyrian to it that the tales he had learned a child could be recited to the same beats he had once learned. Hanno had never found the tale put to writ anywhere, and not for lack of looking. Like much of the wisdom of the Speakers, it was estranged from ink. Tales were living things, to the masked priests of Ashur, and the corpse of them on parchment would be almost as sacrilege.

"The eldest went to war without his blessing, captaining her ship, and though the city won the war her ship was lost," Hanno gravely said. "Dead, they said, but the Patient Man did not yet grieve. His younger daughter grew wroth and cursed his silence as heartless. She blamed many for the death of her beloved elder sister but none more than the rulers of the city whose greedy ways had led to war. So that no sister would be lost again, the younger daughter sought to become a ruler herself."

Rafaela had never been one to hide her thoughts, for all that she delighted in feigning false ones, so it was easy to see how she approved of the eldest daughter who had gone to war and less so of the youngest who sought to rule. Violence was familiar to the Valiant Champion. She had won her Name triumphing over others in honest battle, but it was no coincidence she had then left the hills of her native Alava. To stay in the lands of the Champion's Blood would have seen her drawn into the feuds and schemes of the dynasties of the Blood, made precious by her inheritance of Bestowal.

It was a hard irony, that the same character that had made her the Valiant Champion had led her to want little to do with the Valiant Champion's Blood.

"The younger daughter sought the Patient Man's blessing and the help of his riches. This would be a long and arduous path, the Patient Man knew, for rulers do not like to share their power," Hanno of Arwad said, with a wry twist of the lip. "Yet he held in esteem the conviction of his daughter and desired not to stand in the way of it. Knowing not which was the just course, he kept silent. Once more his daughter cursed him and rose to rule without help, but in rising she forgot her conviction and grew wicked."

Hanno paused.

"To punish him for his silence she swore never to hear a word from him again, but the Patient Man did not yet grieve."

"Good," Rafaella grunted, speaking of the daughter and not the father. "Silence for silence. Honour in balance. Good girl."

Rafaella had never once, in all the years they'd known each other, spoken of her family. It was not unusual for heroes to be born of tragedy but Hanno had long suspected that was not the truth of this. Sometimes he wondered at the kind of mother and father it would have taken, to raise a woman like Rafaella. Who could claim and hold such a hallowed Name at the age she had: seventeen, barely a woman grown.

"There came a day where a man came from the city of Yane," he said, ignoring her guffaw and muttering of Yanu, "who was from there a prince, and he sought audience with the Patient Man. The man had been a captain for his kin in the war and found the shipwrecked eldest daughter. Falling in love, he wed her and had spent time gathering great gifts to bring the Patient Man to ask his blessing. A ship was sailing, with the eldest daughter and the gifts among it, and the old man sent a messenger to his younger daughter to tell her of this wonder. It was a merry day, but the Patient Man did not yet rejoice."

Rafaella's brow tightened. Heroes did not live as long as either of them had without learning to catch the scent of tragedy in the air.

"The following day his younger daughter sailed into the harbour, bringing with her what she claimed a great war prize," Hanno said. "A ship whose hull had been filled with great gifts and hated enemies from Yane, which she had all slain with her own hand. She had refused to hear the Patient Man's messenger, keeping to her oath, and so in ignorance slain her own beloved sister. The prince was furious with grief, named her a kinslayer and swore revenge. He asked that the Patient Man condemn her, to show not all Akra was wicked, but the old man kept to his silence and so there was war."

He'd told Antigone the story once, long ago in an airy city where they had been the only humans to be seen, and this had been where she balked. *The Patient Man is made wicked by this*, she had insisted. *He and his daughter both deserve to be slain as reparations to Yane, for one committed a great crime and the other abides it.* Rafaella did not balk, for her world was a vastly different one. The Dominion was bound as much by ties of blood as it was feuds between families: many a time would Blood forgive or ignore their trespasses of their own while the same dealt by the hands of their foes.

The Ashen Gods of Levant were not as the benevolent Hallowed of Procer or Callow's stern Heavens. In the Dominion, the Gods were partisans. They had favourites, they took sides.

"Yet the younger daughter, broken by her crime, found her old conviction again," Hanno continued. "She offered herself to the city of Yane as a penitent, and the truth of her earnest grief moved the hearts of the people. In time she was wed to the prince, who forgave her, and the cities of Akra and Yane were bound in peace and friendship. The Patient Man died in his bed, father to a grave and a woman estranged."

His voice trailed off, leaving thoughtful silence in its wake. Rafaella was frowning, then eventually she sighed.

"Fucking hate riddles," the Valiant Champion said. "Patient Man fool, good daughter dead bad daughter should have become priest?"

"That is an answer," Hanno agreeably replied.

She sharply elbowed him.

"Is it right answer, though?" Rafaella asked.

"I was once told there are as many answers to that tale as there are Faces," Hanno smiled, thinking of the masks hanged in the temples of Ashur and the priests who wore them. "You're not any more wrong or right than any of us."

Rafaella looked skeptical.

"So what's *your* answer?" she seriously asked.

Hanno breathed out, looking at the marred sky.

"I don't have an answer," he quietly admitted. "All the story ever taught me was a question."

He felt her eyes on him even without turning to look.

"Is it a greater evil to act unjustly," the White Knight asked, "or not to act at all?"

The Patient Man might have saved his daughters great pain, even death, had he spoken. Had he grieved or rejoiced. Yet in keeping his silence, in trusting the Heavens, he had lived to see the birth of peace and friendship between once-warring cities. Was that great good worth the little evils caused by silence? The Choir of Mercy would say it was, had made a sword and law of that belief. But Hanno of Arwad was not the Sword of *Mercy*. And there had been a time where he had held an answer to the story, the one shown him in the depths of that unearthly place where he had become the White Knight. Mortals could not be just, he had been shown. Not truly.

They were flawed, blind creatures and even their finest intentions were blades without a handle. He could trust instead in the judgement of the Seraphim, impartial and farseeing. There was justice, beyond the fallibility of men. Hanno of Arwad palmed a small silver coin, one side bearing crossed swords and the other laurels, and deftly flipped it. It went spinning, a glint of silver in the dark, but it held no answers for him.

The Seraphim were yet silent.

"It true the coin woke?" Rafaela quietly asked.

Hanno caught the coin, snatching it out of the air.

"For a moment," he said. "Would that it had not."

The hope had burned, after the years left adrift. And burned harsher still when Hanno had understood what had truly happened: somewhere in the south, hidden away, Cordelia Hasenbach had ordered that the corpse of an angel be desecrated. *Ealamal*, such a corpse was called in the Dominion. Priests and mages in the service of the First Prince had meddled with something beyond mortal understanding, tried to turn the remnants of a Seraphim into a weapon. And the shadow of a shadow had woken for the barest of a moments without calamity ensuing. It had lit up like a beacon in an empty place within Hanno's soul, blaring to him a warning of how far and fast the First Prince was falling.

Twice over her had been stung, in the Arsenal, and much had he thought of those days. Considered how he might have done things differently, looking into past lives for guidance – for the man he could have been and had failed to be, the one who would have passed that test. He had found no answers, the search only dwindling his power in the Light even as he warred against the dead, left to study only with his own meagre eyes. Catherine Foundling had startled him out of their pleasant *détente*, that day, but his anger there had waned. What wisdom was there in blaming a scorpion for striking? He would not allow himself to be lulled into complacency again, but neither had he misread the Black Queen as he'd once feared.

He had simply never been at odds with her before. It had been a lesson well worth learning, and cheap at the price.

Yet Cordelia Hasenbach had been looked upon with approval by the Choir of Judgement once. Her convictions been judged worthy, even as she denied the Name was her rightful mantle to bear. A scant year later and the same woman had been reduced to someone feeding people into the grinding gears of the Principate of Procer so that the machine's wheels would be kept wet. Hasenbach had no ideals, only an ideal Procer. And though that land would be a beautiful thing to behold, Hanno thought, it would be grimly built and as Evil made it slip further and further away the First Prince was dipping her hands deep in the red.

Already she was up to her elbows, how long before she began to swim? Conviction and despair had been mothers to many a horror.

"Truth then," Rafaella grunted, studying him. "Talk of ealamal."

"It is," Hanno simply said.

The Valiant Champion weighed him with her eyes.

"That why you been middling?" she asked.

He blinked.

"Meddling?" he suggested.

"Middle, meddle, muddle," she growled. "Tradertalk is fool tongue. You understand, Hanno. Now you finger on scales."

Her face grew serious.

"Time was you did not."

He did not deny it.

It had begun as a small, simple thing. But then was the same not true of the first pebble before the avalanche? There had been trouble in the army, after the Black Queen left. The Lycaonese had begun to elect their own leaders, after the death of the Iron Prince and Mathilda Greensteel, of marching to fight with their kin in the north. The leading captains all agreed in this. And Hanno could have stood aside and watched, as he had when the Iron Prince had hung mutineers, for it was not his place to meddle in the affairs of Procer.

But he had glimpsed the shape of it, how it would unfold. They would leave and there would be no stopping them without a battle. Hainaut would weaken, then fall. So instead of standing aside, he instead had stood to the side of those captains who shamed the others for speaking of leaving the fight. And though he had said not a word, his presence had spoken volumes. The White Knight

agreed. The Sword of Judgement, like the Ashen Gods of the Dominion, had picked a side.

Once he'd dipped a toe, it had seemed pointless to balk when the Alamans princes began to bicker and their hosts to desert. He'd brokered a truce between Beatrice Volignac and Arsene Odon, exhorted the levies of Bayeux whose shame about routing at the Battle of Hainaut had been eating away. It had seemed almost just to him to speak to those levies, balancing the scale of the way he had done nothing as Klaus Papenheim slew and imprisoned their officers. He had not expected for them to look to him for command, after, but he was a high officer of the Grand Alliance – he could serve as a commander if he chose, he simply had not. They had fought like lions since, to regain their pride.

They called him Lord White, and meant it not as a courtesy.

Hanno had remembered the clarity he'd felt, when he had been fighting to the north to destroy the bridge, and then the sickening feeling when he had heard about the bloody battle at Hainaut. And with those memories following him around like loyal hounds, he had found his hand moving again and again. Stiffening General Abigail's spine when she began to consider retreat further south, killing the dispute through a scrying ritual when the Red Knight and the Myrmidon almost came to blows in Cleves, advising the Kingfisher Prince to retreat long before the Morgentor came at threat of being encircled.

Small things, all. But many of them. And others had noticed. There was a deference to the way the princes now spoke to him that had not been there before, and it was slowly passing to Named. Many now looked to him for advice who had merely taken it when offered before.

None had noticed that his power was waning all the while, save for his closest friends. That troubled Hanno, for it would have been easy to decide from this that the Heavens were frowning on his action, but for all that he was weakening he did not feel... shunned by the Light. But it was his doubts, he suspected, that were behind it all. The end of his certainties. For Hanno of Arwad had once believed himself as a Patient Man vindicated, but as the silence of Judgement lingered his own was beginning to break. These days he often he dreamt of the story he had told Rafaela, the question burning in his mind as he woke.

The Valiant Champion had been watching him through his long silence, the sky above them alive with writhing smoke.

"Is it a greater evil to act unjustly," Hanno quietly repeated, "or not to act at all?"

And he could not shake the fear that he had not heeded the warning of the story. That he had seeded a doom at the heart of



the Grand Alliance by his action. Would Cordelia Hasenbach grown so desperate, if he had not begun to step beyond his old lines in the sand? He had proof, ruinous proof, that his actions and hers were interlinked. Yet some part of him balked at the notion that simply acting, trying to do all the good that he could, would be a seed of doom. What had he done here, save try to keep the dark from blowing out the last trembling lights in the west?

"Not fighting Evil," the Valiant Champion said. "*Rolling over.* That is greatest evil. You cannot be others, only you. That is what you owe the Ashen Gods."

He thought on that, for a moment.

"I could do more," Hanno of Arwad quietly confessed. "Even now, I stay my hand."

Rafaella smiled gently, and pressed a kiss against the side of his head. He looked at her in surprise, for love or lust she had never been shy in expressing but affection was rarer.

"It's end of the world," his friend said. "When, if not now?"

The words lingered long after she departed, leaving him to silence and the smoky sky. *When, if not now?* Was she wrong? He felt as if she should be, but he could not say how. And that left only a broad, terrifying expanse ahead of him. One that could be filled with anything.

"I could do more," Hanno of Arwad said, voice pensive.

Then perhaps he should. He already knew how to begin. Speaking with Antigone, so that she might lead him to the one who had taught her. The sole man who could bring the Titanomachy fully into the war, the last of the ancient Titans. The thought fixed, firmed, became a decision. And in that moment, Hanno felt it fully for the first time. Not in parts, in moments, as he had until now. Like a beacon. The claim that was stirring in him, to a Name he could not yet grasp. He had his suspicions, however. He was feeling another claimant, after all, to the south.

If Hanno had to put a name to where, it would be Salia.

## **Interlude: East II**

*"I will do better, said the man,  
than the tyrant, who said I will  
I swear, do better than  
the man I kill.*

*the man I kill  
swore to do better than  
his tyrant, and I say I will  
do better now than either man."*

*– "Better Than", Ater folk song (couplets meant to be repeated)*

It would have been a mistake for him to watch the swords.

It was her feet that warned him, when he had any warning at all. Amadeus circled to the side, shield raised and sword low. Hye darted forward, striking high, but he did not bite. Arm tightening, he took the real hit – come by the side, a blindingly quick swing and flick – on the shield and shot into a riposte. She stepped to the side, let it pass her, and turned to swing at the arm. Cursing in silence, he struck out with his shield. He wasn't quite swift enough to withdraw, her blade slamming into his wrist harshly enough he almost dropped his sword, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. The shield slam forced Hye to step back and abandon the killing stroke she'd been setting up.

Amadeus took two steps back, his back drenched with sweat from the hour of sparring now coming to an end. He was slowing, losing his edge. Old age, he supposed, though the now grey-haired man knew he was closer in shape to a man in his forties than this true age. For now, at least.

"You get baited into that riposte too easily," Hye said. "You got too used to being able to kill people with it when you were Named. You're slower now, you can't keep using it."

"I'm still used to being able to correct midstroke," he admitted. "I collected too many habits that relied on Name reflexes."

She snorted, bringing her blades back to the sheaths with a purely unnecessary twirl. Her long hair was kept in a braid today and he'd always loved the look on her – especially when she had a blade in hand. Which she was perfectly aware of, from the sly looks she kept sending him.

"You're too hard on yourself," Hye told him. "In terms of swordsmanship, you're still one of the most impressive opponents I've had. In the finest ten, at least. You just have more practical limits to deal with than before."

"I did have a skilled teacher," Amadeus smiled.

She smiled back.

"I speak, of course, of my mother," he casually continued.

He got a clump of dirt tossed at his head for that, ducking away laughing. Since early in their acquaintance Hye had insisted that there be wagers to their sparring, which had never lost him much coin but ensured he'd cooked most of her meals on the move for decades. Tonight was not to be exception, though he'd been farsighted enough to get the stew going before they began. It was mostly ready by the time he went to check on it, needing only seasoning. Only roasted greens for side dish, as... Amadeus felt his heart clench. He forced himself to finish the thought. As Wekesa was gone and would no longer assemble a makeshift oven to help him make fresh bread.

Hye sat at his side, silent. She knew how to read his moods, and so stayed close but did not impose touch. An invitation. He leaned into her side, enjoying her arm going around his waist as he leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Who?" she asked.

"Wekesa," he said.

"He went out on his own terms," Hye said. "For his son. Remember that as well as the rest."

Amadeus allowed himself to enjoy the comfort a little longer then moved away. Neither of them spoke more of it. Hye was one of the people he'd met who were even more private than him by inclination, she well understood that for some the light of day burned more than it cleaned. They sat with the stew, the old lacquered bowls – whose cracks were filled, oddly enough, with silver – that she'd been using longer than he'd been alive warm in their hands.

"I did miss your stew, and that damned lentil soup," she laughingly told him. "My pupils were nowhere as fine cooks, even though Cocky at least should have been better by sheer divine mandate."

"The Concocter?" he asked, cocking a brow.

It was not common for her to talk of her old students, but not uncommon either. She still had much fondness for her years in Refuge, even though she had left that part of her life behind much as she had once parted ways with the Calamities. He'd always admired – envied – that in her, the capacity to walk away. He was not so blessed.

"Feral little thing," Hye fondly said. "Never seen a Crafter that much bite to them before."

The Teoteul, her father's people, called Named whose Role tended to creation 'Crafters'. In those lands they were held in great respect, she'd told him, often greater than martial Named.

"The way you raised them likely had something to do with that," Amadeus mildly said.

She cast him a sideways look.

"You can just say it outright," Hye said, amused.

"You already know my thoughts on the affair," he replied. "I can understand what you meant to accomplish, but when one's means involve cruelty to children they are best reconsidered."

"What I *did* accomplish," Ranger calmly said. "They left my tutelage with all they needed to survive and thoroughly discouraged from banding together. I didn't coddle them like you did your girl, Amadeus, but they came out stronger for it. Named that get tucked in at night get killed in their first decade. I've seen it happen to more heroes and villains than you've put in the ground."

"Wealth of experience tends to mean more powerful aspects," he conceded, "and personalities less brittle. But you only painted in black, Hye."

I'd been painfully obvious the few times he'd encountered her pupils, never more so than when he'd spoken with young Indrani. The Archer, who'd thought the way to tame the evils of the world was to make herself and her Name into the Ranger's shade.

"It's what I know," she frankly replied. "And it's what sticks."

He shrugged, seeing no point in further speaking of it. He'd already told her his thoughts before and she'd disagreed with them then too. She respected his opinions but had never felt bound to heed them in the slightest – which was, he would admit to himself, half the reason he was in love with her in the first place.

"I suppose you think your student-"

"My daughter," he corrected calmly, evenly.

Pointedly, too. She winced.

"Look, I've already apologized for that talk in Arcadia," Hye said. "I wouldn't have been so hard on her if I'd known she mattered to you as more than an apprentice."

An apology which she meant, and he'd accepted, but it would not mend the broken pot. Catherine was now singularly predisposed to

seeing Hye as an enemy, which might just end up being a massive headache before this was all over.

"She does," Amadeus said, "which is why I see little point in comparing the deeds of our former students. She would not have gotten so far without your Indrani at her side."

Hye's lips quirked at the mention. Ranger was not a particularly fair woman and she'd never shied away from having favourites. Of her little band of Named, Archer had been the one she most liked. Not out of vanity, though one might be forgiven for believing that, but because Indrani had in her belly a rare sort of fire.

"Your little queen might still kill you, before this is said and done," Hye plainly said. "She won't like what you're scheming."

"Neither do you," Amadeus teased.

She rolled her eyes and let it go. Eudokia, for all that he loved her dearly, would not have. It was not in her nature to leave details unattended to, to embrace the unnecessary risk. That attitude had saved his lives many a time, over the years, but it should not be taken as the iron law habit had slowly turned it into. They'd gotten old, set in their ways even as their bodies stayed the same preserved statues of wax. Hye, while older than any of them by centuries, never stayed still long enough to rot. There were lessons to learn in that. In embracing impermanence. Amadeus should not have presumed he would stay the same under the face because the face did not change.

Or believe the same of Alaya.

"She brought the last of your pupils east, you know," he said. "I am not the only one who might face a rough end."

Hye's face was serene as a pond, the shadows of their fading fire clawing at her cheeks.

"Have they grown enough for that?" she asked. "I wonder. I will have to see, Amadeus, who it is they have become. One last test for the children of Refuge."

They went to bed early, for they were to begin moving before the dawn. Northeast of them was an old run-down inn owned by the cousin of a friend, and there letters waited for him. A confirmation from one of his people in Ater that Grem was still alive and writing, growing fat in his house arrest. Alaya did not seem to suspect. Yet it was the other letter, the one from the south, that set him to smiling. Nahiza had corresponded with Wekesa for decades, back when she'd still lived in Kahtan instead of retiring to her tower, and it was only out of courtesy for that she'd accepted his first letter. After that, though, it had been out of curiosity.

The problem he'd put to her was one too fascinating for such a mind to resist, and the possibility of eternal glory a temptation to her pride.

*It can be done*, she wrote in that terse way of hers. *But only with the Tower. No one else has the mages and coin.* The formulas she'd sketched out as a proof of concept he could not understand, not even after all his years of trying to understand more than the barest edges of Trismegistan sorcery, but he tucked them away in his doublet anyway. They would have a use. What he'd needed of her had been confirmation that it was possible at all: the rest was only a matter of finding the right place and right time. The last letter he read twice, to commit the words to memory. Nim had ambushed Catherine out of the Wasteland but the Army of Callow had held fast and now all the vultures were drawing in. Good, rather like he'd thought it might go.

The game he'd not seen coming was the release of Akua Sahelian to become the Warlock, but then he'd been consistently blindsided when it came to Catherine's treatment of Tasia's girl. That she'd not been publicly and brutally executed years ago remained a source of bemusement.

With the loyalist Legions and those that'd deserted coming ever closer, the moment of truth was drawing near. He'd sown the seeds but done nothing more than that, could not do more than that. As he'd told Layan down south, the last thing Praes needed was another banner raised. When the time came, when the blades were out, what was it that would win – the mud or the orders? Amadeus of the Green Stretch had spent most of his life betting on the mud and he had no intention of ceasing at so late an hour. Leaning forward, he put the letter from Kala to a candle. It burned bright and quick, smoke curling upwards. He caught sight of it disturbing a spider, which crawled to a corner of its webs on long legs. Smiling, he dropped the last smouldering remnants of the letter and stepped on them.

Were he a superstitious man, he might have called that a good omen.

—

High Lady Takisha Muraqib of Kahtan was to come to Ater, along with most the nobility of the south.

It was an unusual and unforeseen decision, so Malicia investigated. What dearest Takisha had wanted out of gathering the entire Hungering Sands to her court had become plain enough after a little digging: she'd been trying to rally houses to her banner for an attempt at taking back Foramen. She could have made such an attempt without such pageantry, of course, as Malicia was in no position to stop her. Yet Takisha, for all that she was an intelligent woman, was prone to dithering.

It was a learned error. Kahtan had the most vassals out of all the High Seats, which made large scale enterprises for it difficult unless time was spent wrangling support. Takisha had heeded that lesson a little too well, to Malicia's eye, and come to avoid bold action even when it would best serve.

Yet she was skilled at wrangling, and with the traditional rivals of the Muraqib for prominence in the desert – the Banu of Foramen – dead and gone Malicia had expected her to find a measure of success. That not only she had found none but that she had been driven to take her court north had been a noticeable enough reversal that it must be looked into. Even if this was not the action of a player but instead of an undercurrent of popular feeling, clarity was required. The empress' plans had arrived at too delicate a stage for interference to be permissible.

Spies came and went, scrying rituals crisscrossed the land. Ime was busying herself chasing Amadeus' trail, which she had finally caught, but Malicia left the matter to her capable hands. Instead, as she sat in a comfortable salon tea in hand, she poured over lists of names. Those who had petitioned High Lady Takisha to journey to Ater and formally petition the imperial court for intervention in the south. Some of those names she well knew.

Lord Feisal Rahab, whose great silver mines made one of the wealthiest men in Praes. Lady Nawal Morcos, whose kin had skirmished with the Tribes for centuries. Prominent names, at first, but they had met with Takisha late. And more importantly, they had little to gain from the decision made. She sent for earlier reports. The first to speak with the High Lady of Kahtan were less known to her. Lady Layan Kaisha, Lord Habid Tannen, and on it went for a dozen names. Lesser aristocrats, all of them, with few common interests that she could grasp.

She sent for the files the Eyes had on them. Layan Kaisha was one of Amadeus' veterans, it turned out. So were two of the rest, but most were not. Yet Malicia's mind itched with intuition. This had been done in accord, she grew convinced as her Name began to swell. There was something to **Connect** those names even if she did not yet understand it. Her aspect had never failed her before, even though the leaps of intuition it sometimes leant her were the ficklest part of the boons it granted. She set the Eyes to digging deeper at the nobles.

Behind closed doors, alone, Alaya would admit that the aspect's blooming was a deep relief. After the encounter with Foundling in Wolof, she had feared... Her fingers clung desperately to the cup of tea she forced herself to drink with decorum. *Be silent*, the Black Queen had ordered, and Alaya's soul had obeyed. As if to be able to declare silence was the girl's due Alaya had found that she could no longer Rule. Not in the simulacrum she'd worn, not

in her own body, not *anywhere*. It had taken days for the aspect to return, and even now it was weakened. She could feel it in the people around her, through the connections that **Connect** allowed her to instinctively understand.

Her authority had thinned.

It would come back into its fullness, she thought, that was the trend. But after how long? Another month, year, decade? She'd been told that the Black Queen was not yet Named and already she could do this. The thought was... frightening. As was the memory of the girl's mad grin as she was wrestled down by a dozen men, Alaya tasting blood in her mouth as the little monster cackled. There's always next time, the Black Queen had laughed. Foundling was coming for her head, Malicia now understood. She would settle for nothing less if she were not *forced* to settle otherwise. Practicality and gains would not be enough to sway her, Malicia had misread that very badly.

Spies came and went, scrying rituals crisscrossed the land and her Black Knight ambushed the Black Queen in the depths of the Wasteland. Akua Sahelian was proving worth the investment.

"All is in place with the deserters?" she asked Ime.

"It is," her spymistress confirmed. "We've prepared the scapegoat."

Good, that was one worry in hand.

"Sepulchral?" she probed.

"We still don't know who plans her campaign," Ime admitted. "Not anyone openly in her service, at least. It's slickly done, Malicia. It's possible whoever is doing it isn't even with her army."

That seemed... unlikely, from what Malicia understood of military affairs. Perhaps a Named would be able to work through such constraints, but there was none around to provide such guidance.

"Best prepare for a bloody end," the empress pragmatically said. "She has served her purpose, the time has come to pull the curtain on her rebellion."

"Troke Snaketooth is on track to win the election as High Lord of the Steppes," Ime said. "And he's reiterated to our agents that the terms still stand: if we confirm him in that title he'll lead the Clans against Nok."

Which, combined with the destruction of Abreha Mireembe's field army, would be enough to bury the cause of Sepulchral. The Sahel of Nok and the Mireembe of Aksum would turn on their ruling kin



the moment they thought the cause helpless, and Malicia was willing to offer relatively mild terms of surrender for their return to fold. No need for soulboxing, it would be overplaying her hand. Increases on a selection of taxes would hamper their economic recovery for long enough that the empress could smother them out instead of wielding an executioner's axe. Perhaps an expansion of the Green Stretch at the expense of Aksum, she mused, as pointed lesson.

Treachery was treachery, but no one should swing at the Tower and miss without proper admonishment.

When the in-depth reports on the few nobles she'd asked for came, she finally connected the dots. The lords and ladies that were not veterans were nearly all from border or trade holdings. The kind that would be negatively affected in a direct way by the kind of civil war that'd afflicted the Empire for the last few years. *Ah*, Malicia thought with a smile. It was a faction she was looking at. A very discreet one, difficult to make out on parchment, but a faction nonetheless. One that was hostile to her rule of the Tower. A rash of assassinations would not be overly difficult to arrange, but Malicia restrained herself. When one got rid of weeds, it was best to burn them out root and stem.

It was too early for blades, and she could make use of this for other purposes.

She had letters from Wasteland lords that expressed concerns about the Clans being on the move, and those concerns were slowing her attempts to put together one of the measures that would keep her head on her shoulders and her crown atop her head. The ritual that might solve the Hellgates that terrified the Grand Alliance had exhaustive resource requirements, the kind that not even the Tower's vaults could see to. She'd had to rely on drawing on the resources of northern lords for some of the substances. It needed to be ready soon, she knew. The ritual would bind the gates to open only once every decade for seven days and seven nights, an ideal solution, but it needed weeks of preparation before it could be implemented.

"Send word," Malicia ordered Ime. "We are holding a formal court session in the Tower. As the nobility of the south is coming, so will the nobles of the north."

The Taghreb play had Amadeus' signature all over it. He liked to move pieces towards the centre, were they could be more easily dealt with. He'd get his wish, Malicia decided, and more. Much more. Using the gathering of the Clans as a reason for the court session would see even the most reluctant of lords and ladies come, the empress knew, and with them would come an army's worth of retainers. Another assurance to have in her pocket, should it come to the worst. With the Empire tended to for now, Malicia could turn her attention to further measures that would preserve

her life and reign. She needed leverage on the Grand Alliance, not only Callow, and there was only one place left to acquire it.

The Free Cities, where General Basilia's attempted unification of the League was beginning to worry the cities yet to be conquered. There was potential in that, but none of the rulers involved were willing to engage in talks with the Tower. Between Hasenbach and Foundling, the costs of dealings with Praes had been made to steep for any there to still be willing to pay them. How fortunate, then, that Malicia had replaced the Merchant Prince of Mercantis with a creature of her own.

Alaya was the Dread Empress of Praes. Should weather this storm and emerge from it triumphant, as she had all others.

—

It ought to be an exciting sort of war, but somehow it was not.

Dear Sargon had offered Akua the use of the Amaranth, a sure indication he was looking to get rid of the Tower's leash around his neck. The necklace was a splendid thing, a collar and trailing generous expanse of beads in polished gold and onyx. Each bead held a small sliver of power, at the fingertips of whoever wore the necklace. Yet it was the pale purple precious stone set in the hollow of the throat that made the Amaranth such a powerful artefact, for within it lay a Titan's tear turned to crystal. The purity of the overwhelming grief it emanated allowed a caster to free themselves of all feelings and doubts, leaving one's will the sharpest it could be. Akua's ancestors had used the artefact to make even the most middling of their sorcerer-lords seem skilled, in the past, as the Amaranth was enough to turn even a middling fool into a passable battlemage.

Having been a prodigy herself, she had found instead that the Amaranth not only ended the difficulties she'd had in acclimating in her new body but that it had allowed her to surpass some of her old limitations. The swiftness of her recovery had made spawned many a murmur that she was becoming the Warlock in truth, as was only to be expected, but Akua knew it to be otherwise. She had been Named, once, and not forgot the sensation of it — the warmth of unbroken certainty settling on her shoulders like a cloak.

It had not been difficult to prove her value to the Black Knight, though the stern Marshal Nim had treated her as a hissing viper at first. Detailed information on the spellcasting capacity of the Army of Callow and Catherine's own limitations — which were ever-shrouded, but Akua had deduced to some extent — had bought her a place at the table. From there, it had only been a matter of finding out the Named's weaknesses and presenting herself as a remedy to them. The auxiliary cavalry that had been assembled from highborn sons and daughters from all over the Empire had

been defiant of the ogre's authority, at first, but Akua had eased the burden. She was of the greatest of lineages herself and rumoured to be Named: within days she had them eating out of her palm.

She took one of them to bed, on a whim. A Taghreb captain with a crooked smile and dangerous manners, whose large rough hands had appealed. Not so after she fucked him. She'd had her due of pleasure, more than once, but it had not sated her. It had... lacked intensity, somehow, though she knew that to be absurd. She'd been a shade for years, the sensations should have been almost overwhelming. Akua was careful not to think of what hands might have better pleased – smaller, knuckles always half-scuffed and, no, she was not this *weak*. There were better uses of her waking hours than chasing the never-be.

Settling the highborn cavalry had not given her a foothold with Nim, only ensured that she was now being treated as a mildly useful rattlesnake. Organizing the auxiliary mages into proper casting circles, however, would be a step in the right direction. Akua did not even have a rival there, as the only person of Praes who might have contested her – Nahiza Serrif, widely recognized as the greatest mage in the south – had declined service in war due to her age. Dubious, that, but Serrif was famously reluctant to ever leave her mage tower and Malicia had little to gain from throwing stones at the wasp's nest. After a few brisk duels fought under the pretence of practice, Akua broke the ringleaders of the most important cliques to her service. Most gave way with good grace, as was custom, but some did not.

Kendi Akaze fell to his knees, panting and covered in sweat. The last wisps of his spell faded away, shattered at his feet. Swaths of the ground had burned, but Akua was well-learned in curses and he had not studied them deeply. His blood was slowly boiling.

"Surrender," Akua ordered.

"Did you even know her name?" Kendi hoarsely asked.

She cocked an eyebrow.

"Of course you didn't," he laughed, wetly. "Just another mfuasa. A servant. We don't even know if she died as your dog or if the Black Queen nailed her to a cross. *We weren't important enough the question was asked.*"

Akua studied him for a long moment.

"Your sister?" she quietly asked.

"And two of my cousins," Kendi snarled. "All for your pride. So you could go on serving the enemy. We're all just games to you, aren't we?"

Murmurs of disapproval. It was one thing to bear a grudge for the death of one's kin, respected even, but for a mfuasa to question their place was... disgraceful. If they had been fit to be more than servants, jino-waza would have ensured that they were.

"Surrender," Akua repeated.

He spat to the side, struggling to rise on shaking limbs.

"Her name," he croaked, "was-"

The roar of the flames he formed, not even voicing an incantation, drowned out his own words. There was an irony in that, she thought. A lesson, for those who cared about such things. The spell was at her fingertips in an instant, quicker than even his despair. The flames were smothered in darkness, rot writhing its way up Kendi Akaze's arm. He howled in pain, dropping unconscious, and Akua knew he had to die. He would try again, otherwise. Some grudges could not be set aside. And still she ended the spell. Ordered him dragged to a tent. They thought she would order him tortured, she saw in the eyes of the watchers. Made an example of.

She had him healed instead. The hatred was not gone in his eyes when he woke.

"This changes nothing," Kendi hissed. *"Nothing."*

"I did not expect it would," Akua quietly said.

There was a long moment of silence. She looked outside the tent, hearing his steady breath.

"Why?"

She turned, met pale brown eyes with golden ones. *Because you are my past made man, she thought. There is no pit in Creation deep enough I could bury you in it. Because I loved a girl as a sister, once. I murdered her, and a thousand other sisters since. Where does it end? If no one kills me, where does it end?*

"Why not?" the Doom of Liesse replied.

She dreamt of her father, that night, and woke up with red eyes. Iron sharpens iron, the other mages praised her. She kept to the old ways truly, to have a kept a man who wanted to kill her alive just so she would remain sharp. Bile rose in her throat even as she smiled. This what who she was now, wasn't it?

She did not regret sparing him.

With the mages in line, she proved her value to the Black Knight. A ritual to bring the Army of Callow forcefully into Creation, to deny retreat through the Twilight Ways. It was an inspired piece

of spellcraft, she thought. And she found her hand, moving again and again. Adjusting numbers. It was pointless, Akua thought. Even if the blow was softened she would never be forgiven for it. And still. The hand moved. Some had hated her, in the Army of Callow. Many. Others had been... kind. In their own way. How many of them would she kill with her ritual?

A few less, she thought. If she could.

It worked, and the battles that followed saw her prove herself. Then there was that hard night where the Army of Callow reminded them it was still the same mule that'd kicked in the ribs of half the armies on the continent, slipping behind them. And there would have been battle, but Sepulchral surprised them all. Instead there was a tense, hesitant stalemate and Akua was at last invited to dine in private with Marshal Nim. It was a stiff affair, almost begrudged, and there was no dessert. The marshal proved remarkably forthright, by the time the plates were taken away.

"I can smell it on you, you know," the Black Knight rumbled. "Ambition."

Akua smiled easily, drinking of her wine.

"It seems like a singular curse to be able to smell such a thing while living in Praes."

"You're only charming to humans, Sahelian," the Marshal glared. "Malicia saw use in you and she's been proved right in that, but I still question her judgement to have taken up such a hiltless sword."

"Do you often?" Akua asked.

The ogre eyed her in silence.

"Question the empress' judgement, I mean," the Doom of Liesse idly continued. "Idle curiosity, I assure you."

"Highborn," the Black Knight said, tone disgusted. "He was right about you all, B- Amadeus. Even if the sun fell down on us you'd jostle for the nicest place to die. You don't know what loyalty means."

Oh my, but what an intriguing mistake she'd almost made. Telling, too. She would not be the only to change the word halfway out of her mouth: the Carrion Lord had, for better or worse, been part of the backbone of the empire for decades. That was not a legacy easily cast out. Did it weaken her Name? It likely did. Enough, perhaps, that Catherine's little Squire might be able to slay her given the right opening. Something to ponder.

"Interesting, this talk of loyalty," Akua said. "There are some who would say you've broken faith, following the Empress over your predecessor."

"That's because you think like a child, Warlock," the Black Knight scathingly replied. "Like loyalty can only be about people. You want to know what I follow? There's no need for games, mageling, I'll tell you. It's not like I hide it."

"That would be most helpful of you," Akua agreeably replied.

"I believe in the empire promised us in the Reforms," the Black Knight bluntly said. "A Tower that holds to law and order, that does not cater to the whims of the High Lords. A realm that is not a mangy pack of alley cats fighting over scraps."

"And Malicia offers you this?" she asked, genuinely surprised.

Though the Empress was certainly of a mind to gather the power in Ater, she had never been one to mind a bit of intrigue. It would have been like a prize champion being shy of the arena.

"You're not listening, Warlock," the Black Knight bit out. "This isn't about people. You know what the cornerstone of that dream is? The Legions of Terror. An army that can cow the High Seats, professional and modern and most of all *loyal*."

Akua studied the other woman with open fascination.

"This isn't about the Tower at all," she said. "This is about the Legions."

"You think half my officers, half my men, don't want him on the throne?" Nim said, tone hard. "She's been good to us, Malicia. Better than most. But she's not known. She's the stranger in the Tower."

"It would kill the Reforms, if you rose to help him climb the Tower," Akua slowly said.

"We wouldn't be an institution anymore," the Black Knight said. "The bedrock of stability. It would make us into just another High Seat to please and defeat the entire purpose. Do you think it's a coincidence that he's been skulking about scheming instead of calling on the Legions of Terror? Soldiers would come if he raised a banner."

"I have read the reports," Akua delicately said. "That decision might not be one of principle, but driven instead by the Emerald Swords-"

Marshal Nim laughed, leaning over the table. Her breath was unpleasant.

"You think he's the kind of man who'd flinch at killing elves?" she said mocked. "He's got Ranger at his side. Don't be a fool. He knows it too, what it would do to Praes to call. Just like he knows we'll fight him tooth and nail if he comes for the Tower."

"You sound like you admire him," Akua said.

"I do," the Black Knight said. "I don't like him, Sahelian. I don't love him either, and I fear what kind of an emperor he would make. But I do admire him. Even now, he still believes in the same dream that I do."

The ogre bared her teeth.

"And he'd agree it matters more than any single man."

And there it was, Akua thought. The Black Knight thought herself a fortress for her principles, unassailable to temptation because her loyalty was to something above the dross of petty ambition. She was wrong, of course. Idealists were no less fragile than anyone else if you knew the lay of their castle.

"Oh dear," Akua sighed. "You really are going to get yourself killed, aren't you?"

The Black Knight scoffed.

"Repeat that threat and-"

"It won't be *me*, you fool," Akua sighed. "Warlock. Black Knight. Scribe. Captain. Ranger."

"The Calamities," Marshal Nim said, impatient. "What of them?"

"Where are they now, *Black Knight*?" she asked.

A moment of startled silence.

"Gone," Akua said. "The Dread Empress of Praes does not long tolerate other Named at her table. Even the band that made her bid for the Tower was broken and sent out in pieces, Nim. How long do you think you'll last?"

"Captain died abroad," Marshal Nim flatly replied.

"On whose behalf?" Akua laughed. "Come now, you ought to know better. Did you truly think yourself so different than me in the empress' eyes? You, too, are a hound raised to run down a particular trouble."

The golden-eyed mage pleasantly smiled.

"And Dread Empress Malicia is not the kind of woman who keeps a hound at the table when the hunt is finished, Black Knight," Akua said. "It is a waste, to her. She *puts them down*."

The Black Knight laughed mockingly.

"And you'd never, of course," Marshal Nim said. "So I ought to back you instead, for fear of my life. You've only listened to the parts you wanted to hear."

"I have listened to everything," Akua sharply said. "It is you who ignores the reality around you. Do you think Malicia cares a whit about your little dream, save in how it helps her maintain control?"

"Wind," Nim dismissed, "she benefits from-"

"Not enough," Akua snarled. "Gods, when are you all going to understand? It will not be enough, because when you hold the Tower *it can never be enough*. There's always another enemy, another doom, another doubt. She'll cut open the Legions to make what's left her creatures. She'll hobble them so they can't ever raise a hand against her. Because you have ideals, you fool, and *she doesn't share them*. In the back of her mind the whisper is always there: is this the line that makes them turn on me? Is this the order they will refuse? She doesn't make decisions because they are lawful or fair or they bring stability. Malicia cares about being in control. That's it. That's all of it."

She had risen to her feet, at some point, but she did not recall.

"There's no place for your dream in that Dread Empire," Akua said. "And there's no place for you either, Black Knight. For a Named that will get in the way of making the Legions safe. I have a spell that will kill me, somewhere in this body, but Gods burn me if there is not a sword hanging above your head just the same. We are meant to be *temporary measures*."

The armoured ogre watched her in silence, still as a statue.

"I rode that black doom to my end, once," Akua said. "I know the look of it, Marshal Nim, and the empress is a woman in the deep throes. There was a time where I thought-"

*That I spoke words like these so they would trust me, she thought. So they would love me. So that I would have a seat by the fire, until they saw through it and turned on me.* Her nails bit into the palm of her hand.

"It doesn't matter," Akua got out. "It is all scrapped iron, that's all. Pointless."



"You are," the Black Knight slowly said, "perhaps the finest liar I have ever known."

"You want truths?" Akua asked. "You want proof? Fine. Ask someone you trust to inquire as to what a pattern of three is, Black Knight. You who fought a Squire and won."

She smiled mirthlessly.

"Because I know," the Doom of Liesse said, "and I assure you the Empress does too."

And she had not, Akua knew bone-deep without even have looked, said a word. And though tomorrow they would return to war, to the bitter fruit risen of the bitter seeds Akua had lain, she knew from the look in the Black Knight's eyes that she had just cracked the stone with the blow.

And still, curse all the Gods who listened, she was not hearing the *damned song*.

## Chapter 16: Anchor

*"To suffer defeat is not to be defeated. One is an occurrence, the other a state of mind."*

*– Dread Empress Sanguinara, the Shrewd*

It was as if our armies had played a round of musical chairs.

The Loyalist Legions had been camped at the tip of Moule Hills, south of us, but they'd burned that camp to force us out of our camp in Kala Hills. Then we'd gone around those same hills and stolen a march south of them, taking Kala Fortress and setting up over their supply lines. The final bit of surprise, though, had been when Marshal Nim had marched her army south expel us from our new position and instead been forced to retreat north: Sepulchral's vanguard had popped up atop Moule Hills, threatening to flank her if she gave battle. So now here we were, the three of us staring at each other as the afternoon sun pounded down on our helmeted heads.

The vanguard set up shop at Nim's old camp in Moule Hills, in what I could only call a fit of irony. Not without paying for the nice campsite and half-filled dry moat, though, going by the detonations and screams that'd followed the rebel forces moving there. Looked like I'd been right to think that the Black Knight had trapped the area with goblin munitions before leaving it. We were keeping an eye on both the other armies in the region, scouts out and about, but not going on the offensive. The unexpected arrival of Sepulchral's three thousand had bought us time and we intended to use it to the fullest.

See, even after having outmanoeuvred the Loyalist Legions none of us thought it was anything but stupidity to try to go and attack them in their – formerly our – fortified camp in northern Kala Hills. And given the disparity in our numbers and the fact we'd taken some bruising losses, none of us were particularly eager to face Marshal Nim in a fair pitched battle either. The chances were high that even if we won the costs would make it a strategic defeat. If Juniper had been herself I might have risked it, but as she was... The Hellhound was still largely silent during the war councils she was supposed to be leading.

On the other hand, we couldn't just let the Black Knight slap us out of our superior position either. We could cut off her supply lines from here and ensure we wouldn't run out of water. So Sapper-General Pickler had given us our solution.

"We raise a wall," she said, leaning over the map. "Between Moule Hills and Kala Hills, at the narrowest part of the valley."

And so while half our army had gone in the rest to shade, the rest had spread out across the valley. Sappers and regulars were digging trenches, going from east to west, while palisades were being raised. Our main camp was still next to Kala Fortress, where we could use the wells and the walls, but out in the valley two makeshift forts were already under construction behind the trench line. The Legions hadn't taken that lying down, of course. The auxiliary cavalry had come out in force the moment it'd become clear what we were doing, but we'd been waiting and ready. It'd not been lightly armed Levantines facing down the riders, this time, but a proper shield wall with crossbowmen behind it.

After a hard reminder of the difference in range and power between javelins and standard-issue Legion crossbows, the enemy horse had beaten a retreat. They kept harassing us all afternoon, though, even as the Loyalist Legions mounted their answer to our new stratagem. I was standing next to Pickler as it began to play out, sighing.

"We should have seen that coming, really," I admitted.

She spat to the side.

"They'll get their fortifications up faster than we will ours," Pickler warned. "We're outmatched in both sappers and labour."

In answer to our containment of them with a trench and wall, the Legions of Terror had begun building their own to our north. Not even that far, damnably enough. About two hundred feet beyond our furthest crossbow range, with their cavalry waiting out in the valley just in case we got foolish enough to try a skirmishing war. Pickler was right, I grimly thought, as she tended to be when it came to sapper's work. I could already see the gap between the capacity of our armies in action: the Legions had

begun working three hours after us yet already they'd caught up to two thirds of our trench length.

"Theirs are more vulnerable," I noted. "They still have Sepulchral's three thousand on the wrong side of the walls."

Which might actually be part of the plan, I thought. The Black Knight would either bait them down from the hills in an ill-advised attack or fortify around them until they became irrelevant. That might explain why she wasn't being more aggressive in trying to get us off her supply lines. She wasn't digging in to stay so much as putting up defences to prevent being flanked before she hammered away at us. From her point of view, this battle would be settled long before her stores of food were at any risk of running low.

"I can't speak to that," Pickler shrugged. "You know my interest in tactics is limited. What I can tell you, though, is that we'll need our best skirmishers in Kala Hills tomorrow."

I had to crane my neck more than I wanted to so I could have a look at her. She was standing on the side of my missing eye. I felt my fingers clench. It was always the little things that got to me.

"Why's that?" I frowned.

"We don't have enough stakes to make a wall the length of the entire valley," she said. "And neither do the Legions. So we're going to have to cut wood, Catherine, and the only place in the region that has any in the quantity needed-"

"- is Kala Hills," I finished.

Plenty of brushlands in those rocky hills, some proper trees too. With this having turned into a war of entrenchments, those bushes and trees had just become as precious a commodity as water. We'd begin by cutting the wood closest to our camps, of course, but then they'd need to go south and we would need to go north. Closer to each other.

"The moment we both run out of *sudes*, the easiest way to slow the other side from building up is to harass the soldiers cutting wood," I said, rubbing at the bridge of my nose. "Shit. That's going to get *messy*."

"That's a word for it," Pickler snorted.

She seemed amused, but her face suddenly stilled. She looked away, biting at the inside of her cheek. A long moment passed, a silence I did not dare to break. I knew whose memory had struck her like a punch in the gut.

"He would have loved it," Pickler finally said. "The mess. The chaos."

"The danger," I ruefully said.

She nodded, then returned to silence. Honest emotion was not something that came easy to goblins, so I let her choose her words at her own pace without sticking my foot in it.

"After Ratface died," Pickler said, "I thought we were done losing them. That we'd paid our due to the Gobbler, that the rest of us would make it."

"Nauk," I quietly said.

"He was gone long before they killed him," she said, shaking her head. "The Warlock... didn't bring much of him back. Not enough for it to count."

I did not disagree, keeping my shame to myself. I'd thought, once upon a time, that Night might have mended that. These days I was not so sure, but I had clutched that hope close in the early days of my return from the Everdark.

"Then they got Hune," Pickler continued. "That was..."

"I didn't think you two were close," I said.

"We weren't. She wasn't the kind that made friends. But she was one of *us*, Cat," the goblin quietly said.

Over the years, somewhere along the line the veil that'd once separated the Rat Company cadets from the Fifteenth had fallen. There just weren't enough of us left for the distinction to matter. With every fresh war I dragged us into, every hard stand, another body had dropped. We were a dying breed, those few that'd been in it from the start.

"She was," I acknowledged.

Hune had not been my friend and I had never trusted her entirely. But she had been one of us anyway, in that intangible way they only ever quite became real when it started feeling like loss.

"And somehow I still didn't see it coming when Robber died," Pickler said, tone bitter. "He used to go around telling us he was invincible, that he just couldn't seem to croak-"

My throat tightened and she stopped herself, looking at the men raising walls in the distance.

"I guess I believed him a little, even when I rolled my eyes. I thought that even if we all died, Catherine, he'd be the last one

to bite it," she said. "Somehow. It just never felt real that he could be... gone."

"Sometimes I still feel like he'll pop out from behind a stone," I admitted. "Grinning, making fun of us for having gone soft."

"But he won't," Pickler harshly said. "He *won't*. And there's so many things with him I left half done, because I always thought there'd be more time. After this battle, that plan, that book. I waited until the Gobbler took him because I was too... lazy to talk to him."

"We always think we could have done more, when people die," I said. "Especially people we loved. It's not fair to either them or us."

"What does fair ever matter?" Pickler tiredly said. "'It won't fix a thing. It's not wood and steel, I can't take out what's broken and make good again. Instead what I have is regrets and a letter I'm too afraid to open."

I breathed in sharply. Hakram had told me Robber had left her a letter, but I'd not known she had yet to read it.

"Why?"

"I know what's in it," Pickler said, then snorted. "Or maybe I don't. I don't know which scares me more."

Robber had loved her, once. When we'd been little more than children he and Nauk had both courted her attentions and fancied each other rivals, not that anything ever came of it save bickering. She'd liked the attention, but she'd never been all that interested in romance. Besides, goblins thought of love differently than humans. It didn't mean the same things, didn't carry the same expectations even when it was returned.

"Did you love him?" I quietly asked.

Hesitation.

"No," Pickler replied.

Then she chuckled bitterly.

"Maybe," she admitted. "It was... messy. I thought he'd want more than I wanted to give, so I never let him ask."

I breathed out, hand itching for my pipe. I restrained myself.

"I think you did," I murmured. "At least a little."

Her shoulders tightened.

"After the war," Pickler finally said, "I wanted us to go to the same place."

It was as close to admitting affection as she would ever get, I thought.

"I expect we all will, Pickler," I softly said. "He's just gone on ahead one more time."

She laughed, a little grimly but genuinely. Goblin humour tended to run even darker than my people's. There was a reason they got on so well with Lycaonese, whose gallows humour was black enough even Callowans balked at it.

"It feels like unfinished business," Pickler eventually said. "That's all. And I don't know how to finish it."

*Sometimes you don't,* I thought. *You keep walking with that weight on your back, knowing one day you'll buckle.* My instinct was to lay a hand on her shoulder in comfort, but it would be no such thing to a goblin. Instead I gave her the sole courtesy I had to offer: work to disappear into.

"Prepare our builders for skirmish," I said. "Draw on our reserves for regulars if you need to."

"You're going to hiss at the snake?" Pickler asked, sounding surprised.

Poke at the bear, I decided, only for the Grey Eyries. It always surprised me that even after all these years there were still expressions from east of the Wasaliti I'd never heard. In Lower Miezan, anyway.

"Something like that," I said. "I figure that we've got one asset the Legions have no answer to, so it's about time to use it."

I wasn't going to be sending skirmishers out to fight theirs in the space between our trenches, I wasn't that much of a fool. They had crossbow companies waiting for that mistake, same as us, and my men were a lot more tired than Nim's anyway. The Army of Callow had marched all night and not had a full eight hours of sleep since, it was on the ragged edge. Instead I sent for two people: Archer and the Silver Huntress. My instructions were straightforward.

"You see these people?" I asked, pointing north.

The two of them eyed the enemy legionaries and sappers raising a wall and digging a trench, a swarm of ants just outside the range of our crossbows.

"Sure," Archer shrugged.

"I do," the Silver Huntress gravely replied.

"You've got bows and I want corpses," I bluntly said. "Have at it."

That got a delighted laugh out of Indrani and a measuring look out of Alexis. Neither of them bothered to use the elaborate bows they'd received as gifts from the Lady of the Lake, instead stringing good yew longbows from Daoine after ensuring they were well provisioned with arrows.

And then, easy as breathing, they began taking lives.

The enemy were maybe seventeen hundred feet away, well out the range of even the longbowmen of the Watch. But these two were Named, sharpened to a razor's edge in the greatest war of our time, and so they began killing their way through the enemy as if were not impossible. Archer went for officers, Huntress for the sappers. It took a while before the enemy even realized what was happening: they scrambled about looking for skirmishers that weren't there, at first. And even when they did realize, the response was slow. Archer had killed the people who should be shouting orders. Within half an hour the regulars were in a full testudo and sappers were either huddling in their trench or gone.

At the hour's turn the sappers came back having assembled rough mantlets, wooden walls on wheels they could bring forward and take cover behind. It was a mixed success: the two archer Named first bled the regulars that broke cover to put them in place and then ignored them entirely, curving their arrows to fall down from above. Those shots weren't anywhere as lethal, but they still disrupted the sappers trying to get back to work. It was only half an hour after that the situation came to a close, when mage lines were sent out to raise shield spells around the sappers to protect them entirely. In the distance I recognize the woman who led them. Tall, dark of hair and with strange golden eyes. Akua looked our way as well, but nothing was spoken.

It was still too early.

"We could have at the mages," the Silver Huntress said. "If we start using our proper bows and our stock of mage-killing arrows."

I shook my head. I might have considered it if they were mfuasa and nobles, but these were Legion mages. We did not have enough mage-killer arrows for this to be a good trade.

"Better to let them win now," I said. "Let them feel safe and get sloppy."

Indrani eyed me amusedly.

"You're sending us back after nightfall," she said.

My smile was cold.

"Get some rest, you two," I said. "You have a long night ahead of you."

And I needed to get back to camp. The fortifications were a good measure to take, Pickler had been right to suggest them, but they weren't a plan.

If we were going to win this, we needed one of those.

—

Vivienne wasn't alone in her tent when I went to see her. I'd been about to enter anyway when I overheard the voice of who she was speaking with. The Laure drawl wasn't rare in my army, but I knew the timbre of that voice too. I was curious enough about what had brought the Squire to her that I decided to... actively overhear. It wasn't called eavesdropping when it was a queen that did it, there were laws about this stuff.

"-did a number on him," Vivienne was saying. "I know there are parts of Callow where he still has a good reputation, but they tend to be the ones that saw little of him."

"He was chosen by a Choir, I am told," Arthur hesitantly said. "Can that truly be a harmful thing?"

"Angels are a lot of things," Vivienne said. "Most of them are good. But do not ever, for a moment, believe them to be harmless. Even their kindness has teeth, and Contrition has little other than the teeth to offer."

"Yet you fought with him," the Squire said, voice daring her to deny it. "At his side."

"Some of the things we did back then were right," Vivienne said, tone gone quiet. "But some of the others... we weren't fighting the right battles, and not against the right people. Doing good's not always the same thing as doing Good."

"There's priests who would call that heresy," he said.

"Heard lot of that talk, when I was your age," Vivienne said, and I could hear the hard smile in her voice. "Heresy this, blasphemy that. What did the Praesi care? Wasn't priests whining that got the Empire to leave. Keep to Above of you want, there's nothing wrong with that. But like Jehan the Wise said, prayer and a sword work better than prayer alone."

A sentiment I could get behind. The sword part of it, anyway. Deciding I'd eavesdrop- actively overheard for long enough, I



made my presence known by loudly approaching. Fuck, I thought as I entered the tent, but someone was going to have to teach the kid to hide his thoughts better. He looked like I'd just caught him with his hand in a honey pot, it was painfully obvious he thought he'd been doing something bad. I wasn't too worried about talk of the Lone Swordsman, myself. Contrition had been trying to hook the Squire from the start, but William was not a great angle for them to take. A lot of Callowans hadn't been fond of the man.

That tended to happen when you carved messages into people's foreheads, even when those people were Praesi.

"If you'd excuse me, Your Grace, Your Majesty," Arthur said, bowing.

I shrugged and Vivienne waved him away. She waited until he was gone from the tent to cock an eyebrow at me.

"So how much did you listen at?"

I put a hand over my heart, deeply wounded by the implication.

"How dare you," I gravely said, "and when you started talking about the way people remember William."

"The end, then," Vivienne said. "Kid's been dreaming, but they're all over the place."

I frowned.

"Still the broken sword?"

I'd broken the Penitent's Blade and good luck to anyone trying to – no, Catherine, that was a good way to get stabbed with pointed irony in a few years. Let it simply be said I had been thorough in dispersing the shards of the angel's feather.

"He has a whole array of them," Viv replied, shaking her head. "Different Squires. He does get the sword dreams, but I'd bet that's Contrition trying to nudge him down that road."

"Those nosy fuckers," I grunted. "They need to learn when to quit."

I wasn't above asking Zeze to look into the practicalities of a pointed lesson for those vultures when this was all over. Malicia and Amadeus had outlawed the Name of Chancellor, when she climbed the Tower, so maybe I should look into outlawing the Hashmallim getting their sticky fingers into any of my countrymen.

"He's not like William was," Vivienne frankly said. "Nowhere enough self-loathing. I imagine they'd like him on the throne instead of you or me, but he's a lot more interested in knighthood than crowns. That bodes well."

"He's still a wild card," I said. "Different Squire dreams means he's not settled, Viv. No telling what kind of a Knight Name he'll end up transitioning into."

It sounded a lot to me like the Heavens dangling shiny paths in front of their newest Callowan hero to find out what might stick. And there were some that I simply wouldn't be able to tolerate. Rebel Knight, for one, Eleanor Fairfax's old Name that'd popped up in Callowan history whenever a tyrant needed toppling. It irked me how much Name lore about the days of the Old Kingdom had been lost. I understood why my father had destroyed pretty much all he could – legacies were dangerous things when you'd destroyed the last iteration of them – but it still left me more knowledgeable in the ways of Praesi Named than those of my own kingdom.

Maybe it was for the best, I told myself. Using old tools and old means tended to lead to the same old ends.

"Lots of that going around," Vivienne admitted. "Yours is so close I can almost taste it, Cat. You're already starting to get the coincidences again – what were the odds of you stumbling into this talk?"

Low, practically speaking.

"I think it'll take shape when we settle the Tower," I admitted.

I'd know for sure if I started getting the reflexes again.

"You're not far either," I said. "Or he wouldn't have been having that talk with you in the first place."

She grimaced.

"I'm not sure what it is," Vivienne said. "And there's... something missing, I can't quite put it into words."

"You need something to take you over the top," I said, tone clinical. "You've got your Role and the will, but you need weight. A story that people will talk about."

That famous charge at the Battle of Hainaut had not been quite enough.

"I thought you might be angry," she admitted. "I know you wanted Callow to be ruled by someone without a Name."

I sighed.

"Those provisions of the Accords are essentially dead," I said. "And in the end it's not a theoretical candidate I'm entrusting that throne to, it's Vivienne Dartwick. I stand by that choice whether it comes with a Name attached or not."

Her eyes shone and I looked to the side.

"Thanks," Vivienne quietly said.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably.

"I did come for something," I said. "Your scheme in the Legions?"

"Won't work if it looks like we're losing," she replied. "I'm still looking into getting in contact. It's ready, I just need my foot in the door."

"Hurry it up," I asked. "I'm not sure we'll be getting a decisive battle before Sepulchral arrives. If the rest of her army arrives in time, I want our finger ready to pull the trigger."

"I'll see it done," she firmly replied.

I nodded. I was about to take my leave when I saw hesitation on her face.

"Viv?"

She brushed back an errant strand that'd fallen out of her braid. It still looked like a crown, her milkmaid's braid, even when she did not wear the silver circlet that'd become hers when I formally named her a princess of Callow. She bit her lip.

"The Name," Vivienne quietly said, "I do not know if it will be..."

She trailed off, hesitating again.

"I don't think it will be one of Below's," she said. "Cat, I know that-"

I limped forward a step, leaning over the desk, and even as her eyes widened in surprise I pressed a kiss against her forehead. She looked up, startled, as I drew back.

"I didn't name you my successor so you could keep making my mistakes," I said.

There was nothing more to say, as far as I was concerned, and so on those words I left her.

—

Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara still brewed what was probably my favourite tea in the world. Herbal Wasteland stuff, nothing like the horrid imported leaves that Hasenbach was so wild about, and I'd yet to ever dislike a mug she'd made me. Not that the pleasant taste made what we had to talk about any more pleasant.

"I've never seen her like this before," Aisha said. "In her first year at the College she had moments, before she found her footing, but this is different."

I grimaced.

"I didn't see it coming," I admitted. "I know Nim pulling one over us twice in a row had to be a shock, but we've had hard rides before. What makes this different?"

Aisha elegantly sipped at her tea, which was the polite Taghreb way of gathering's one's thoughts without being uncouth.

"It has been coming for some time, I think," Aisha finally said. "Looking back now. But I am afraid that the tipping point would be you."

I froze in my seat a moment, taken aback.

"I thought I'd made it clear I still had full trust in her abilities," I slowly said.

"Yes," Aisha gently said. "Which made it sting all the more when she failed your trust by being defeated so starkly."

*Fuck*, I eloquently thought. Had I been turning the knife without even realizing it?

"She said things, after you left," I began, hesitant to continue.

"She's afraid it didn't all come back," Aisha murmured. "Yes, she has confided as much in me before."

"The Grey Pilgrim himself said she was all there," I told her. "It wrecked her body to extract the commands, the hooks were deep, but the weakness is purely physical."

"You trusted the man, which weighs on the scales, but not all of us are eager to take the word of the Peregrine for anything at all," she replied. "It is doubts, Catherine. She believes she was either lessened by Malicia's spells or never on even footing with the Empire's marshal, and cannot believe in either without loathing."

Aisha sighed and then, for one of the few times in all the years I'd known her, slumped into her seat.

"And she loathes the indecision too," she continued, "which makes even standing still a defeat. It is... tangled, Catherine. And perhaps this was a long time coming. We all rose swiftly under you. Some might say too quickly."

I sipped at my tea.

"I'm not one of those people," I said. "And unless someone else has taken to wearing my crown, that's the only trust in need of keeping."

She met my eye, then slowly nodded. Aisha had always been hard to read, her lovely heart-shaped face ever showing anything she did not want it to.

"I am proud, you know," Aisha quietly said. "Of the army we built, all of us. The kingdom. It was bitter and often thankless work, Catherine, but you did not pretend otherwise when you asked us to follow you. And looking at all we have done, even after all it cost us, I am deeply proud."

She slid a finger around the rim of her cup.

"I would not let that legacy bury us," Aisha said. "Juniper... if she fails you here, it will haunt her to her grave."

"I don't know how to make her eager for the fight again," I admitted.

I'd never had to, before. Never learned to.

"I might," she said. "I looked through her papers as she slept."

My eye narrowed but I did not interrupt.

"She has been sketching out theories," Aisha said. "And one stood out. I would have us show her, Catherine, that she is not blind and lost."

"I'm listening," I said.

And we planned, the two of us, how to follow the plan my Marshal hadn't given me.

—

For a bit, it looked like we'd accidentally started a night battle.

Archer and Huntress had come out to reap another harvest of lives, but when they began shooting at the legionaries sleeping in forts exactly like those we'd raised — it was the same damned pattern both sides used — it looked like we'd kicked a hornet's nest. Not only did goblins and regulars come out in force, but so did a large force we hadn't anticipated. The entire Eighth Legion had left the camp in Kala Hills and begun marching towards the trenches. Our watches and horns did their job properly, calling for a brisk assembly, but it was clear that we'd not get to our fortifications in force before the enemy did. Not that it mattered, I thought, because the Eighth wasn't actually there to attack us. Juniper had believed it would be two legions, but

she'd written that a delaying force at least one strong would march our way.

Now there were two more of her predictions left to come true.

The first came true within a quarter bell. In perfect marching order, the Eleventh and Fourteenth Legion crossed the valley to begin an assault on the camp in Moule Hills where Sepulchral's vanguard was now beginning to wake in a panic. Eight thousand legionaries marching against the three thousand mixed force of household troops and cavalry. If the Black Knight closed in before they were ready, and she would, it would be a slaughter. I was rather proud of how quickly the Army of Callow began gathering in the valley facing the Legions. By the time the Eighth finished living up to their cognomen of Trailblazers and took over the Legion fortifications facing ours, our own vanguard of three thousand was on its way to our side of the trenches.

"I think we took them by surprise with the harassment by Archer and Huntress," I mused. "At a guess, because of the dark they thought it was an attack on their position."

"Then why did the Eighth march out so quickly?" Vivienne asked with a frown.

"Dedicated response force," I said. "Nim had them waiting for something like this. Which is why there's only one other legion marching to reinforce them."

I pointed in the distance, where the Thirteenth was marching to bolster the Eighth in their defensive position. The Black Knight's own legion, the Seventh, was staying back. Serving as a reserve, most likely.

"And now the Legions gamble on our being too slow to stop them from wiping out the Askum troops," Vivienne muttered. "Isn't Marshal Nim afraid we'll overwhelm the eight thousand she's putting in our way? Sepulchral sent household troops, not the sort of men who die quickly. If we gather enough soldiers here, we could break the two legions in our way and perhaps even defeat her army while it's divided."

"Good instinct," I praised. "She's very much afraid of that. It's why she's kept her own legion as a reserve, it keeps her options open. That way she can either use the Seventh to shore up the defences in the valley or to give second breath to the assault on Sepulchral should it stall out."

"It still seems risky, especially trying it at night," Vivienne said. "What if we gather quicker than she anticipated?"

"Here's where it gets interesting," I mused. "See, what we sent to reinforce our trench was our readied troops. Night watch,

soldiers on duty. It was a pretty solid number for an army our size. But the second wave of our soldiers is going to come slower. They'll need to wake, put on armour, find their officers and muster before marching out. There's going to be a beat between the two waves."

"So she attacks us when she still has more soldiers on the fronts than we do?" Vivienne guessed.

"That'd be a blunder," I said. "If she tries to overwhelm our trenches, she risks our people holding and her men being out of formation when our second wave does arrive. That could go *really* badly for her, the kind of disaster you were talking about earlier."

"So what does she do?" the sole princess of Callow asked. "Why are we here, Catherine?"

"Because the Hellhound believes that Marshal Nim is going to make use of that beat between the waves," I said. "Not to overwhelm our position in the valley, no, but to delay the reinforcements. To make sure that we can't threaten to overwhelm *her* position in the valley while she deals with the Askum camp."

"And how would she do that?" Vivienne asked.

I wasn't the one who answered her. It was, instead, the thunder of thousands of hooves against the half-road. Three thousand auxiliary horse rode down the sole road of the valley, well to the west of the standoff between the Eighth and our vanguard. They weren't heading there in slightest, after all: they were going to continue doing the road before taking a brisk turn east towards Kala Fortress, to strike at my soldiers before they could properly form up into a second wave. They'd retreat soon enough, light horse couldn't handle the Army of Callow in a lasting fight, but all they had to do was sow enough chaos and death to slow us down before running away.

It would buy the Black Knight long enough to do achieve what she was after, removing Sepulchral's vanguard from the board.

Of course, there was just one little bit of trouble with that. Three thousand light cavalry, packed in a tight column so they could make the best use possible of the road, were a fearsome force. But also a fragile one. So I wanted until they were in deep, too late to easily leave, and then I turned to Grandmaster Brandon Talbot. He'd been waiting all this time, listening with an eager look on his face.

"I'm going to pull down the veil," I said. "Ready?"

"At your word, Your Majesty," he replied.

It'd been a pain to get Masego to anchor the Night-working in a stone and meant it had been a pretty basic illusion, but it'd allowed me to get around that little trick of Akua's with the red light circle. The Legions had gotten too dependent on that for sniffing me out, they really ought to have known better. With a murmured prayer I tore the Night out of the stone, feeling it crumbled to dust in my hand, and suddenly the moon shone pale above the glinting ranks of the Order of the Broken Bells. Lances down, shields up, the knights were in broad flanking positions just ahead of the largest cavalry force left in the Wasteland. I glanced at Vivienne, grinning and gesturing at our foes. She grinned back.

"KNIGHTS OF CALLOW," she shouted. "FORWARD!"

Once, twice, thrice the horn sounded.

Death followed.

## Chapter 17: Aim

*"To be great one must stand on the shoulders of others.  
The difference between rule and tyranny is whether they  
raised or you stepped on them."*

*— King Edward Alban of Callow, best known for annexing  
the Kingdom of Liesse*

I'd not seen that many dead and dying horses since the Graveyard.

Casualties were a haphazard game, when one tried to count them in the wake of a bloody melee in the dark, but I trusted my eyes. At least half the force of three thousand that'd proudly thundered down the road now lay dead in the dust, torn through like parchment by Callowan lances. The rest had fled, panicking as my knights butchered their way through the tightly packed column, and there'd be no more fighting out of them tonight. It'd been a massacre: we'd caught them flat-footed and in the wrong formation. Even after the casualties the Order of Broken Bells had taken, I suspected we now had more cavalry left than the Black Knight. That meant we'd killed at least three horsemen for every lost knight, the kind of exchange rate utter routs were made of.

Yet as the stink of blood and shit filled my nostrils, as the death cries of men and horses joined in a strange elegy, my eyes stayed on the horizon. The Order had not pursued the fleeing horsemen, Talbot had known that it was a fool's errand and it'd put us at risk of running into an enemy trap. The orders given had instead been to send away the few prisoners taken, execute the dying and change mounts in anticipation of another ride. It seemed, though that there would be no need to send my knights



into another melee. Marshal Nim, from her perch, had decided she did not like the growing shape of the battle. Too many risks, especially now that her horse had routed in the dark and the Army of Callow's reinforcements were marching unhindered.

If my vanguard tried to take her fortifications in the plains with the support of the Order, she might face an outright defeat here. Her forces were still split and I was the one with the cavalry advantage now. So the Black Knight did the smart thing, the prudent thing. What the Legion doctrine she'd helped write would have advised: she retreated.

The assault on Sepulchral's soldiers in the heights was called off and the Seventh prudently moved to reinforce the two legions already gathering to face my army by the trench. Marshal Nim wouldn't attack, though, and neither would I. Taking trenches, even only half-finished ones, would be messy. Too risky, given the exhaustion of our armies and the lack of coordination that came from fighting in the dark. Her officers were better than mine, sure, but she wasn't going to bet on the same army that'd slugged it out with the Dead King for years being the army to break. When the going got rough and the fighting became about who had the iron to pull through? There was no beating the Army of Callow.

So instead of a battle, what we were going to get was two armies standing in battle array half a mile from each other in the dark for a few hours before both retreated. I pulled off my helmet, shaking free my wet hair. I wasn't great with a lance, but I'd gotten in close with my sword after sowing further panic in the enemy with Night. There was blood on my armour that wasn't mine. I looked up at the starry sky, breathing out slowly.

We'd made it through one more night.

—

Aisha had thought that following Juniper's plan successfully would shake her out of... whatever this was, but the following morning I saw differently. I'd taken it as a good sign that she had headed out towards the frontlines, but it wasn't to our fortifications she went. She didn't go to inspect the trenches or the forts. Instead Juniper had headed further west, near the half-road that it would take us days to build all the way to — about six, Pickler believed, at our current pace. I found my marshal's escort milling about uneasily on the valley floor while Juniper herself stood alone beneath a tall sycamore tree. It didn't give much shade, its branches skeletal and bare of all leaves.

The Hellhound was one of the tallest orcs I'd met, taller than any in the Army of Callow save Hakram, and she'd always had a presence. Even as a cadet, the broad shoulders and ramrod

straight way she stood had made the military in her visible to even a casual glance. I tended to have a hard time placing the age of orcs that were between their twenties and forties – before or after, the signs were pretty distinctive – but I'd known Juniper for years. Seen her grow as I grew, the lines of her broad face harden and her fangs thicken. Her eyes, black like most orcs', were deeper set than when we'd first met. The skin around had grown greyer, too.

Yet in all these years I'd never really seen her... sag like this. It was a little subtle, could have been taken as just leaning against the tree in someone like Indrani, but to someone who knew her it was plain. Her shoulders were hunched, her expression exhausted. She didn't greet me after I limped to her side, eyes still on the growing lines of fortifications in the distance. Dawn had passed an hour ago, both the Legions and my army were back to work in the cool morning air.

"There are better places to take it in," I tried. "If we go near the foot of the hills to the east, we can make out the Aksum camp as well."

She did not answer. I waited, at a loss. Juniper had never been one to swallow her feelings, so these long silences she'd taken to hiding in had me on the back foot.

"I recognized the plan," the Hellhound finally said.

"You should," I said, "it was yours. And it worked."

Not my subtlest of approaches but sometimes blunt was the way to go. A surprisingly large amount of the time, really. Yet instead of what I'd been looking for, her shoulders further hunched.

"It wasn't," she roughly replied.

"Juniper, we literally cribbed your notes," I flatly said.

Finally she turned to me, jaw clenched tight and eyes hard.

"You took my read of the situation and you made it yours," the Marshal of Callow evenly said, the growl kept low in her throat.

"I predicted some decisions Marshal Nim might make, like half our general staff could have had they been asked. You took those guesses and made them into a functional battle plan."

My fingers clenched but I forced myself to stay calm. It was like she was trying to be obtuse.

"Using the Order was-"

"*I wouldn't have used the Order, Catherine,*" Juniper angrily said. "I wouldn't have fought at all. I would have moved half the army closer to the trenches so that the Black Knight would be

forced to do the same and it became too much of a risk for her to attack Sepulchral."

I blinked, then hid my surprise.

"That would also have worked," I pointed out.

"Your solution was better," she growled. "You won the same prize, forcing her to back off from Sepulchral, but the Order's ambush cost her half her horse as well. If I had given you advice, if you had taken it, it would have been *an inferior result*."

I bit on my tongue before I could tell her it would still have been a good one, knowing she'd take it as a slap in the face.

"If you hadn't predicted Marshal Nim was going to attack none of it would have been possible," I said instead.

"General Zola believed she would as well," Juniper said. "You simply never asked her, because you insist on pretending I am something I'm not."

I grit my teeth. Why was she insisting on embracing the worst possible slant for everything? Fuck, she'd been outplayed by the Black Knight only twice – when had she become so fragile?

"And what would that be?" I bit out.

"A better commander than you," the Hellhound gravelled. "Someone whose advice you should be taking."

"That's-"

I almost said ridiculous before biting down on it. Calling her a fool wasn't going to achieve anything.

"- the truth," Juniper said. "When have I ever won a victory, save when you were dragging me along?"

"You beat back Malanza at the Camps," I said.

"I played for time until you could return," she replied, "and would have lost if you had not. It's been like that since the start. Three Hills was your plan. Marchford, Five Armies and One, Dormer – all the way to the Tenth Crusade. And when I did hold the command with none above me, I almost broke the Army of Callow in Iserre."

"I handle the Named part of those plans," I said. "The military parts were yours, Juniper. In almost all those battles, I went down in the ranks and fought. Someone needed to actually command the army and that's always been you."

"You don't need a Marshal for that," Juniper said. "You need a general, and you have plenty already."

"I don't agree with that in the slightest," I harshly said. "And you're forgetting who built this damned army in the first place, Hellhound. It sure as Hells wasn't me."

"Don't you see how senseless it is?" Juniper miserably said. "We had a single draw when we were kids and it's all come from that. Every office, every honour, every title. I am a child in marshal's stripes facing a real marshal of Praes. It can only go one way."

There was nothing I could say, I dimly realized. We could be at this all day, I could have the silvermost tongue in Creation or the finest rhetoric of the Free Cities and it wouldn't move her an inch. She'd swallowed the lie, let it settle in her guts. Words wouldn't fix this. Fuck, I wasn't sure I *could*. My eye strayed to the sycamore, the shifting lay of its shade baring what I had missed: it was dead, inside. Through cracks I could see it had gone hollow, dead at the heart and the limbs simply too slow to have caught up to the truth. When I looked at Juniper she did not meet my eye.

"I will refuse a resignation if you offer it," I curtly said.

I got back on my horse and left her to her tree.

—

The bruising night battle had changed the balance of power in the valley.

We'd shown we had teeth and the Army of Callow had managed to recover from the exhausting overnight forced march that'd won us Kala Fortress. The Black Knight wasn't as sure she could take us on a field now. So both my army and the Black Knight's avoided further fighting, in the valley at least. Zola ordered a permanent night watch on the Legions in case they made another move on Sepulchral's vanguard, but like us Marshal Nim was focusing elsewhere: the valley between the hills of Moule and Kala had become a race of fortifications. I sent Archer and Huntress out to slow them as I had yesterday, hitting them at different places in the line, but even so their advantage in sapper numbers told.

They caught up to my own sappers and then began to overtake us, though not by too large a margin. Across the valley mirrored works were emerging: two lines of trenches facing each other, with palisades behind them. East to west, the both of us hurrying towards the half-road. We even took the same precautions, pulled from the same doctrine. To prevent a night attack overwhelming

our positions, we raised walled camps behind our walls where we could keep protective garrisons.

It was in Moule Hills that the fighting continued. I needed all my sappers down in the valley working on the siege works, which meant I'd have to rely on regulars to actually head out into the hills and cut wood. Compared to the goblin skirmishers from that would be shaken loose to harass us, my legionaries would be at a distinct disadvantage. A protective screen had to be sent out, so I sent for the two I believed to be the right people for the job. Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osená came into my tent an hour past dawn, but it was not an elaborate plan I gave them.

"Kala Hills," I said, pointing at the map. "If it's an enemy and it's in it, I want it dead. Keep them off our woodcutters."

"The plan?" Razin politely asked.

"Pick your men, pick your pace, pick your battles," I shrugged. "Those hills are yours."

Aquiline grinned.

"You have us an honour war, Black Queen," she said, sounding delighted.

"Honour can bite my ass," I said. "Bring me scalps, Osená."

The look on her face was somewhere between scandalized and gleeful, which actually did wonders for my mood. At least the lordlings could be counted on not to fall apart, I thought as I sent them out of the tent. By afternoon I had my first reports: the Dominion force was taking to the task with fervent enthusiasm, the Malaga contingent in particular. Fighting the Champion's Blood in the Alavan hills for centuries had ensured they were well versed at fighting in this sort of terrain. It was a bloody, tribal fight just the way the goblins and the Levantines liked them. Razin himself came back near Afternoon Bell with a fresh scar and a pleased look on his face, just in time for Vivienne to ambush me as I got a cup of wine in him before sending him off to a healer.

"The commander of Sepulchral's force sent us a rider," she said, briskly entering the tent. "They want to meet."

"Finally," I grunted. "You got a name for me?"

"Isoba Mirembe," Vivienne said.

I let out a low whistle.

"Sepulchral's heir," I told a confused Razin. "Her grand-nephew."

"Does she have no closer relatives?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"It used to be her nephew, but we killed him at the Folly," I said. "They have a time for me, Vivienne?"

"Half-past Afternoon Bell," she said. "South of Moule Hills."

I grimaced. Would have to saddle up soon, then. And since the young man – he was nineteen, I vaguely recalled, or thereabouts – was technically heir to both Askum and her claim on the Tower I'd have to bring enough high-ranking people it wasn't an insult. There weren't really many I could spare, though. Then I shot a considering look at Razin, who was noble.

"Finish that cup, lordling," I said. "And get that wound looked at. We're going for a ride."

Might as well pick up the other kids, I thought. Sapan would be pissy at leaving Masego's side – or more realistically his grimoires – but it would be good for her and Arthur to get a proper look at Wasteland high nobility. Besides, even though I didn't believe the call to be a trap that hardly meant I trusted the Mirembe. Two more Named would be a useful precaution. Razin Tanja set down his empty cup on my carved table, standing up, and that was the sound of us getting a move on.

—

Isoba Mirembe looked a lot like I'd expected Sargon Sahelian to. Tall and with slender muscles, his face a perfect symmetry of high cheekbones under cold golden eyes. He was beautiful, but almost more like a statue than a man. It reminded me uncomfortably of the Exiled Prince, who might as well have been cut out of marble. This one, though, did not have a Name. How many potions and spells had it taken for his dark skin not to have the slightest of imperfections on it? The armour he wore was practical, at least, if incrustated with enough jewels to arm an entire company of legionaries. My escort of knights was a match in numbers for his retinue, but instead of the handful of nobles he'd brought I instead had two Named and a ruler of the Blood.

"Black Queen, I greet you in the name of Dread Empress Sepulchral," Isoba said, breaking the silence, "and give you her thanks for your intervention last night."

"The Black Queen greets her back," I drily said. "You know who I am. With me ride Lord Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood, the Apprentice and the Squire. And, of course, twenty of the same knights that ran down the Legion horse last night."

The last part was a break in manners, but I regretted it not the slightest when I saw the backs of my knights straighten. They'd

earned the praise, as far as I was concerned. Isoba introduced only the nobles he'd brought, each a ruling lord or lady in their own right. He'd not skimped on the rank of those he brought, at least, which was a good sign. With that out of the way, we got to business.

"A truce between our forces would be only natural," Isoba suggested. "Neither Aksum nor the true empress have any quarrel with the Grand Alliance."

"A truce is a start," I said, "but it's just delaying the trouble. We need to strike at the Black Knight together."

"My aunt would welcome the official backing of the Grand Alliance as ruler of Praes," Isoba easily replied, smiling without a speck of joy. "On such terms an alliance could be made."

"You're not getting that," I bluntly said. "And you lending a hand to the business of keeping your hides from being tanned is hardly worth that asking price. Poorly bargained."

"Why would we pay for what you offer freely?" the young man laughed. "It is in your interest to keep our force from being overwhelmed, lest you find yourself fighting the Legions alone."

"You're standing on quicksand, Mireembe," I warned. "I'm not going to keep pulling you out of the fire if you're of no use to me. Better then to let the Black Knight bloody her forces killing you all."

That got his attention.

"Bluster," he dismissed, but his eyes had sharpened.

I sighed. There was no point to this if he had no grasp on the precarity of his situation.

"This is why children shouldn't be sent to negotiate," I said. "You've wasted my time."

He looked like I'd slapped him, which to be fair I pretty much had. His gaggle of nobles were studying him for a hint of his thoughts – or of weakness – but he wasn't going to walk back his words after I'd insulted him. We'd have this talk again after Marshal Nim put some proper fear in his belly, or she killed them all. Either way, it was no trouble of mine. So long as the vanguard had a proper standing fight instead of being slaughtered half asleep, I figured they could cost the Legions at least two thousand men going down. It'd make the Black Knight's force somewhat more manageable.

"Back to camp," I told my people, pulling at Zombie's reins.

My eye found that Razin, though, was looking at the other young man with an odd look on his face.

"Since I was a child I have been told of the cunning of the Praesi high lords," the Lord of Malaga said. "And *this* is the truth of your blood? This is a bitter disappointment."

"What would a savage from the edge of the world know of anything?" Isoba mocked. "The Mirembe could wipe out your misbegotten bloodline as easy as—"

"I have been on that horse, once upon a time," Razin said, eyeing the other lord. "So I am not without sympathy for your position, for it is not pleasant. Yet even a savage from the edge of the world knew it was better to swallow pride than perish like a fool. Where is the cunning and power that your people so often boast of? All I see is an arrogant child who would kill himself and all with him out of wounded pride."

Eyes, amber and dark, studied them both coolly. The nobles were listening.

"You know *nothing*," Isoba hissed. "Either of cunning or death. If the Legions come, they will be cowed."

"If the Legions come, you will die," Razin slowly said, as if speaking to a half-wit. "I am Blood, Isoba Mirembe. I understand honour, the pride of defiance. But that pride must be rooted in something more than fantasy, else you have saddled a dead horse. When the Black Knight comes you will be slaughtered to the last, and you are breaking off talks with the sole woman who can prevent this. This is *senseless*."

Huh. Isoba was looking at him like he wanted to skin him alive and boil him. Shit, now I was almost hoping the heir to Aksum would live just so he'd have to keep remembering that little speech. The nobles had watched it all, and I saw now that looks were being traded. They had come to a decision.

"It was not known to us that Marshal Nim had become the Black Knight," one of them idly said. "The situation has changed. Names are not to be underestimated."

"Perhaps talks should be had, after all," another said, smiling pleasantly.

Neither were looking at us. All of them, amber-eyed vultures, were looking at Isoba Mirembe. I saw it sink in, the truth that if he did not bargain Sepulchral would have another heir by nightfall. And it was hard pill to swallow, but still better than dying, so he turned to us with a mild smile and talks began anew. I sent Razin a fond look. Sat in that horse before, had he? Sarcella had not been so long ago, and still it felt like a



lifetime. What did the man I was looking at now have to do with the boy I'd fought in that city?

So very little.

—

Isoba Mireembe would not concede to joining us in battle unless his position was assailed, and on that the nobles seemed to back him. Orders from Sepulchral herself, I suspected. We did strike a bargain, though: he would harass the Legions from behind, slowing their works, and in return I promised to intervene if the Black Knight tried to wipe him out again. It wasn't what I'd wanted from him, but it was still better than them staying holed up in Moule Hills twiddling their thumbs. The second day rose to much the same arrangements as the first: in the valley walls raced east, while in the hills trees fell and blood spilled.

It was all ambushes and raids in there, not a single standing fight to be found. War parties came back with trophies or never at all. The Dominion was better up close and with javelins, it became clear from casualty reports, but the Legion skirmishers were hardened veterans with full stocks of goblin munitions. We pushed them back far north by afternoon, but it led the Levantines into a series of vicious ambushes on mined grounds that forced them into full retreat. Aquiline captured a prisoner that shed light on the turnabout: the Legions had sent for volunteers from Risas, the town by the lake, so that they might have native guides in the hills. The losses earlier in the day had been bait for the trap.

In the valley the Legions were still ahead of us, but Isoba had been true to his word: he sent out his horse to harass the enemy. Quick hit-and-run attacks on companies between Marshal Nim's camp and the walls, burning a few carts and killing a few isolated tents. He retreated immediately when the Legions sent out their own cavalry, returning to the safety of the camp. The Black Knight hadn't made it a priority to bottle up the Askum troops before, but that changed with them making it clear they were willing to go on the attack. Sappers were pulled from the valley to begin raising a ring of forts near the foot of the hills where Isoba was encamped.

Good, it'd slow the Legions where it mattered.

On the third day, the situation in the valley and hills stabilized. In Kala Hills, the chastened Levantines established a cautious stalemate slightly to the north of the lines of fortifications. It left the greater part of the Kala Hills and its wooden bounty in Legion hands, but the Aquiline had sent her slayers to secure a few hidden glades to the east that kept us sufficiently provisioned in wood. Considering the disparity in numbers, I was more than satisfied with the performance of the

Dominion forces and made that plain to both lordlings. It was in the valley that we pulled slightly ahead, our wall and trench passing the Black Knight's. The Legions had carts full of what I believed to be siege engines brought to the front, though, and I ordered the same of my men.

No battle ensued, though. When trouble came it came from elsewhere. Scribe found me near Afternoon Bell and led me to a tent where two men were bound and gagged under guard.

"Who am I looking at?" I asked.

"Trusted servants of Lord Sokoro Abara," Eudokia said. "I've been keeping an eye on him. They were sent to take the long way around Moule Hills and get in touch with Marshal Nim. Some information would be passed as a gesture of goodwill, ties established."

Well, he hadn't struck me as a particularly trustworthy man. Hadn't expected him to try to play both sides so quick, though.

"What kind of information?" I asked.

"Minor," Scribe said. "Troop numbers, camp gossip."

Mhm. So nothing too drastic. He'd wanted to establish credentials, not outright jump ship. Not yet.

"He's still got his half-brother in a cell?" I asked.

Scribe nodded.

"Take him out," I decided. "Stash him somewhere in our camp."

"And these two?"

I eyed them.

"Put their heads on his bed," I said. "With a written note: *no second chances.*"

That should remind him in whose hands his leash was. It better, I had plans for tomorrow and wanted no distraction from them.

—

On the fourth day, I decided it was time to try to kill Marshal Nim.

Not here and now, unfortunately. I was unlikely to succeed with a nascent pattern of three nudging coincidence in her favour. But I could, at least, solidify that pattern. The veil over that knife was to be the Army of Callow going on the offensive: we were only two days away from our trench reaching the road, half the valley's length already fortified, so the time had come to test

the enemy's defences. The Legions had mounted their siege engines, as had the Army of Callow, but neither side had begun firing. We'd not wanted to begin that slugging match too early. Until now.

My ballistae began hammering at the enemy palisade at the turn of Morning Bell. Within eighty heartbeats, the enemy returned fire.

They had us beat in numbers for traditional Legion siege weapons like ballistae and scorpions, but by doctrine a legion didn't usually carry trebuchets unless an actual siege was planned. That gave us an edge in range and power with the three we had, but as the sky filled with stones I saw the margin was much thinner than I would have liked. On both sides mages had been brought to the fore, using shields to prop up our palisades so they wouldn't break under hits, but the enemy's superior volume of fire was hammering harder at us. We had fewer mages, too. I had an answer to that, fortunately: Archer and the Silver Huntress began using their proper bows.

Javelin-sized arrows began killing the siege crews and breaking the engines, our own ballista fire forcing their mage lines to stay and protect the palisades instead of covering them. The Black Knight had other mages to call on, though, and they intervened before my Named could do too much damage. A whirling wind formed over the enemy position and I grimaced. That looked simple and easy to maintain, which was bad, but worse was that neither my archer Named could land an arrow through that. Magic like shields they had arrows that could go through, but not wind. And it was exactly that, just magically induced.

Time to gamble, then. This might turn around on us if we didn't. I gave the order and the signals went up. In the Kala Hills to the east, through a path the Levantines had found, a strike force of a thousand emerged past the enemy defence line. There was a fort in the way, the Legions had known of the path's existence, but suddenly the wind in the sky stopped whirling and instead formed into a great spear. It hammered down into the fort, killing an entire company in a moment as Hierophant reminded everyone on the field why people avoided fighting mage Named of his calibre.

The legionaries rushed past the wreckage, heading straight for the enemy engines with two silhouettes at their head: Squire and Apprentice. *Come on, Black Knight, I thought. You need to keep those engines, otherwise digging out the vanguard in the hills will get a lot more complicated. It's only a thousand, and you can handle a mere Squire can't you? Take your swing. Come on.* A surge of power in the distance reminded me why I wasn't with the assault, a ball of poisonous green clouds beginning to form above my own siege engines.

"Hello, Akua," I coldly smiled, and unleashed the Night I'd spent an hour gathering.

My work was here. I'd asked Masego to keep the kids alive if this went south, it would have to do. And it was looking pretty good. The force with the Squire got to the engines and set two on fire in quick succession while I maintained a stalemate with the mage nobility and arrow fire began picking off Legion mages. Only the Black Knight wasn't showing. Not even in a possessed body. Shit, she wasn't taking the bait. Worse, even as my attack force began running into entrenched opposition and was forced back I found out where the Black Knight actually was: there was smoke coming from the Aksum camp. Had she hit them with an ogre line like she'd done our camp near Wolof?

Sepulchral's men didn't make fortified camps like the Legions and the Army did, a raid like that would go... badly for them.

Cursing, I have the order for a retreat. We'd broken at least half of the enemy siege engines, those deployed here at least, but it'd been costly. Even with Hierophant covering the retreat, we lost a little over half the thousand we'd sent. And Marshal Nim had not shown. I'd not finessed fate into killing her before the campaign was over. How had she known not to show? My fingers clenched, then unclenched. Akua, had to be. But why would she tell the Black Knight? If she was going to make a play for the Legions, and she must if she was to attempt to overthrow Malicia, she could not keep Marshal Nim alive. The Black Knight was a loyalist, the marshal that'd stayed true.

So what was her game?

It was beginning to slip out of my hands, I realized. I'd thought I had a handle on the path Akua would take, and I still believed that I did, but I had to wonder... I pushed aside the worries, attending to the here and now. With our retreat, siege fire petered out on both sides and ended entirely by Afternoon Bell. Sappers on both sides began repairing the chunks of palisade that'd been blown away, and that strange air of truce fell over the valley again. There was no more killing over the fourth day, not even in the hills.

All knew better than to believe it would last.

—

On the fifth day, Scribe brought news.

"Sepulchral's army is getting close," she told the war council. "If she keeps up the current pace, by evening in six days she will reach Moule Hills."

Opinions were divided on how we should react to that.

"We should delay until the greater army arrives," General Zola pragmatically advised. "Sepulchral will likely attempt to use us to destroy the Legions at the least cost to herself possible, but she will still broadly be on our side."

"Or she could sit it out entirely, waiting for someone's supplies to run out and desperate decisions start getting made," Aisha pointed out. "We should not assume cooperation of Abreha Mirembé, she is well aware that we do not wish her to climb the Tower."

"Even if we do want to finish off the Legions before Sepulchral arrive, *can* we?" Vivienne asked.

"If her vanguard helps, I believe it's possible to win a field battle," I said, then hesitated. "I'm not sure how decisive a victory it would be, however."

"That would strengthen the position of the pretender empress when she arrives," Lady Aquiline said. "Give her power in bargaining with us."

She wasn't wrong, I admitted. If Army of Callow and the Loyalist Legions bloodied each other just before Sepulchral arrived with her fresh force, it swung the balance in her favour. On the other hand, should we really wait six days just for this to still be true only with her camped in the hills over the battle? Aisha wasn't wrong either, when she'd said that Sepulchral might just try to live up to the vulture on her banner. No decision was made, in the end, though I knew one would have to be soon. If we were going to attack, it would have to be somewhere over the next three days. Otherwise the margin to rest and regroup before the empress-claimant arrived would be risky.

The trenches and palisades in the valley kept steadily stretching east, and by tomorrow Pickler was certain we'd reach the half-road. Fortifications were not, unfortunately, a goddamned plan. That was our trouble here: we didn't have a plan to beat the Black Knight, even if we could force her into a pitched battle. Which was looking less and less likely by the day.

Both sides extended their defences to the road on the sixth day, the skirmishes beginning again in earnest in Kala Hills. Weather blew in from the north-east that forced everyone to retreat by early afternoon, though with the warm morning sun being covered by clouds as the air cooled. What began as a hard rain that sent everyone running to fill water barrels turned into something altogether less pleasant before the hour was out: rain turned to snow, and then the kind of hard hail I would never have expected of the Wasteland. Everyone was stuck in tents for the rest of the day, until the storm passed halfway through the night.

When the seventh morning rose it was to still-wet ground, the hail having melted overnight, but also to General Zola bringing

me a worrying report. Two lines of scouts sent to the south of Moule Hills were hours late in reporting. We hadn't seen movement from the enemy, but the Black Knight might have moved troops under cover of the hail.

"Battle formations," I ordered Zola. "And prepare a force to handle our eastern flank in case they went around Moule Hills unseen."

Yet I learned, not even an hour later, that I'd been wrong. It was not the Legions that had caught our scouts. Well, in a sense I supposed it actually had been. In the middle stretch of Moule Hills, well to the south of Sepulchral's camp and about the height of the mirroring fortified lines, banners had been raised. Legion banners: the Second, Third and Ninth.

The Rebel Legions had arrived before Sepulchral could, and the balance hadn't swung against us so much as swung down on our heads.

## Chapter 18: Release

*"The trick isn't to win battles, it's to let your opponents lose them."*

*—Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general*

General Sacker came to meet me with a company of a hundred heavies and three lines of mages, the lot of them glittering with at least half a dozen defensive enchantments and shield spells at the tip of their hands. Well, would you look at. The Rebel Legions had grasped the reality that I might be somewhat cross at them. It was almost like they'd taken my coin and supplies for years before turning on me at the first opportunity. I wasn't going to be forgetting that, or any other of their small slights.

"Hail, Black Queen."

A mere twenty knight stood fanned out behind me. What need did I have for a larger escort than that?

"Sacker," I said. "Fancy seeing you here."

The goblin general had only walked up to the edge of the defensive enchantments and not a step further. I would have been offended by that if I hadn't seriously considered slaughtering the entire contingent and ripping her plans out of her mind on the ride here. Only the certainty that it would push the rebels to allying with the Black Knight, however temporarily, had stayed my hand.

"You were warned of our march," General Sacker replied. "We have dealt openly with you."

"Debatable at best," I flatly replied. "But let's pretend I buy that, just for a moment. Keep up that alleged streak and tell me what you lot came here to do."

"We aim to engage in talks with Marshal Nim," Sacker said. "We have no intention of fighting you save if you force our hand."

I snorted. General Mok's plan to talk the Black Knight into deposing Malicia was still their play, then. They were fools if they thought it would get them anywhere. Nim was in deep with the Tower, she wasn't going to defect now. Malicia would string them along until she no longer had a use for them, a situation I could only assume was imminent.

"And your stance regarding Sepulchral's forces?" I asked.

"If arrangement is reached with the Black Knight, there will be either surrender or war," Sacker said. "If not, the situation remains fluid. Regardless, we will not attack unless first provoked."

Mhm. Then they weren't all in on Mok's plan yet. The vanguard in the northern Moule Hills was being used as threat on the flank of the Loyalist Legions, one they had no intention of removing before a deal was struck with the Black Knight. An alliance with the Rebel Legions wasn't on the table – wouldn't be unless Marshal Nim refused their entreaties outright, which she wouldn't because she wasn't a fucking idiot – so there was no point in aiming for that. I could, though, aim for a smaller concession.

"Then I'll ask for your promise to stand aside should I intervene to prevent Marshal Nim wiping out the vanguard," I said. "If not your help outright, which I would take as a sign of good faith doing much to restore your trustworthiness in my eyes."

She hesitated.

"They are a rebel force," General Sacker hedged. "The Black Knight's duty is clear."

I met her eyes and let all pleasantness drip down from my face.

"My tolerance has limits," I said, tone so very mild.

"We are not in your service," the goblin general snorted.

"No," I replied, "but so far you have toed the line when it came to being my *enemy*. You might want to consider the price of crossing it, before you offer me another half-hearted platitude."

"I am a general of-"

"You were a general," I coldly interrupted. "Now you're a vagrant that twice bit the hands feeding you. You're out of chances, Sacker. With me, with the Tower, with everybody else."

"Threats will not sway me, girl," General Sacker said.

I let Night billow in my veins, coming quicker for the anger in my blood.

"A threat?" I laughed. "Do you honestly think your little spells would stop me if I wanted you all dead? If I wanted to rip out every secret from your head and make them dance before my eyes? It's not a threat when I warn you, Sacker. *You are not strong enough for my words to be hypothetical.* If you get in my way, I will fucking step on you."

I leaned forward.

"So I'm going to ask you again," I said. "I want your promise to stand aside, should I intervene to prevent the Black Knight from wiping out Sepulchral's vanguard."

Still she hesitated, and a ring of red light formed high above me as Night kept coming to me. I ripped it out of the sky without even bothering to look.

"So long as no deal has been struck with the Black Knight, you have our promise," General Sacker finally said.

"Good," I harshly smiled.

"You are not making allies with your words, girl," the goblin said.

"And still I somehow seem to have more than you lot," I replied.

I cocked my head to the side.

"And Sacker, one last thing?" I added.

She watched me expectantly.

"Call me girl again and I'll make you eat your own tongue," I calmly told her.

Somehow, I saw, the calm gave her more pause than my anger had.

—

The Rebel Legions did two things the day they blew into our increasingly crowded battlefield. The first was send envoys to both myself and the Black Knight. The second was throw their hat in the ring, so to speak. The Loyalist Legions and my Army of Callow had dug trenches and raised palisades along two thirds of



the length of the valley between the hills, all the way to the road, but the deserters sent their sappers downhill the moment they had a camp up and began digging a trench of their own. Facing mine and Nim's, vertical to our horizontal.

"They're digging a hundred feet past crossbow range, both ours and the Legions'," General Zola informed us at council. "Sapper-General Pickler believes their fortifications will end up in a thin crescent facing our lines."

"We'll need to raise our own trenches facing theirs," I sighed. "Or they'll be able to flank us at will."

It would turn our fortifications into a straight corner with one side facing the Loyalist Legions and the other the Rebel ones, while the Black Knight's trench would end up at a much wider angle. Given their more numerous sappers, though, I didn't anticipate them losing much of a step.

"We're getting boxed in," Grandmaster Talbot said. "With all these walls and trenches the Order will be made useless."

"We can't prevent them from raising fortifications of their own without forcing a battle," Aisha said. "One at which we will be at a severe disadvantage, should the Black Knight reinforce them."

Which she probably would. The deserters were still at a full force, thirteen thousand and fresh. The Army of Callow numbered a little under thirteen thousand, now, and Nim's legions should be around twenty or twenty-one thousand. That battle would see us outnumbered more than two to one while flanked, which was a recipe for disaster. We couldn't afford to start that fight.

"We do nothing," I said, the words bitter against my tongue. "To them, at least. Our sappers need to prepare our flank for the possibility of assault now."

It was out of my hands, now. All I could hope was that my enemies did not yet band together. The day passed quickly enough, laden with bad news, but the following warning ended up just as darkened. Scribe had requested the war council gather, which was rare enough I did not think twice about granting the request. What she had to say was not long, but it still hit hard.

"It cost me most of my agents within Sepulchral's main host, but I have found out who plans her campaign for her," Scribe said.

I laid back into my seat, already sensing this was not pleasant news.

"Instructions are received by letter, which are read out loud over scrying ritual," Eudokia said. "The physical letters

eventually make their way to Sepulchral herself, however, and my people were able to forge a decent copy of one before fleeing camp."

She set down a letter on the table, which aside from having calligraphy small and cramped did not particularly evoke anything in me. Juniper, though, breathed in sharply.

"This is Grem One-Eye's handwriting," Scribe said. "He has been planning Sepulchral's campaign for her from captivity in Ater."

I grimaced. Well, fuck. Just what we needed, another marshal in the mix. My fingers clenched, then unclenched. Wrong way to think about this, I decided. Grem wouldn't have had the pull to do this on his own, someone had to be helping him. Hells, someone had to have *asked* him to do this because otherwise I couldn't see him helping Abreha Mirembe. And only two people were in position to do it, Malicia and my father. It didn't fit Malicia, though, her way of doing things. Even if she'd been helping Sepulchral stay afloat with good advice, she would have cut off the flow now. She could no longer afford game this elaborate.

So it meant I had, at last, found the first trace of what my father was up to in Kala.

That somewhat improved my mood, but it passed quickly. While I'd been lost in thought I'd not been paying attention to the table, which only claimed my attention again when there was a ripple in the assembled council. Juniper had gotten to her feet.

Without a word, she walked out of the tent and did not return.

—

Once more I found the Marshal of Callow standing beneath a sycamore.

The same as last time, a bone-dry skeleton of a tree hollowed out inside. Dead and dying, the limbs having yet to catch up to the emptiness at the heart of it. Juniper's escort had stayed far, as ordered, and as I limped past them across the dusty ground I found my eye dragged above. Sunset was painting the sky in layers, just like the stones of the hills to the west: the dark blue of night high above, with a distant moon, but then it lightened. Yellowed. Only to deepen once more, orange and red and at last a rich purple. Day died and its death throes shifted across the stone and dust, shade cutting in fluid slices as it swallowed up Creation in a never-sated maw. The Wasteland, for all its many dangers, was capable of eerie beauty at times.

Juniper was not leaning against the tree. I saw that first, even as I approached her. I had thought to find here the same hunched and self-loathing creature that'd been wearing the skin of one of

my oldest friends for over a sennight, but this was... different. Her back might not be straight, but she was not sagging like withered vine. Instead she stood there with a lost and thoughtful look on her face, looking straight west. I followed her gaze, founding nothing more than the sappers of the Rebel Legions at work digging their own trench and palisade. They were skilled hands, well-drilled for all that they had deserted the Tower's service. The three generals leading them had kept them disciplined.

I hesitated to break the silence. I'd found what I'd thought I would, and I was not sure I wanted to interrupt... whatever this was. For all the intensity of the Hellhound's gaze, I had of late seen in her fragility that had me staying my hand. As I wrestled with my doubts, she came to a decision of her own. Her voice was rasping when she spoke. Dry, and she licked her chops before doing it.

"The Scribe, she said that Sacker's in command among the deserters," Juniper said. "Is it true?"

I hummed.

"Can't be sure," I admitted. "But the Jacks heard the same thing. I think Mok has more pull when it comes to strategic decisions, since he has the biggest army, but that Sacker's the lead for tactics."

Her eyes never left the sappers digging to the west. I bit my lip, then cast aside my hesitation. It wasn't doing me any good.

"They tell me you've been here more than two hours," I said. "Have you been looking at them the whole time?"

The Hellhound laughed. It was a low, rumbling thing. Not quite amused or happy, more like a... release. Vented feeling.

"Yeah, I have," Juniper said. "Because there's this..."

She shook her head.

"She was like an aunt to me, Sacker," the orc said.

I did remember. It felt like a lifetime ago, but I remembered. I'd never seen her as embarrassed as she had been when I'd first seen her meet her mother and almost-aunt fuss over her after she became a legate. It'd been a memorable sight.

"Auntie Sacks," I idly said.

"She used to tell me stories," Juniper distantly said. "When I was small, Catherine. To make me go to sleep. That was all back in Summerholm, before I went home to be raised by my father.

Goblin stories about gore and raids and little girls that got gobbled up for being too slow or too dim."

"She seemed close to your mother," I said.

I'd never grown to know either more than shallowly, but it's been obvious to be even when I'd been young.

"She was probably Mom's closest friend in the world," she replied. "She spent more years of her life with Sacker at her side than she did my own father. It showed. Goblins aren't usually... good with children. Sacker was making an effort."

"She seems to have made an impression on you," I said.

Juniper flashed pale fangs at the deepening night.

"She did," the Hellhound said. "But not just for the stories. Did you ever hear she was meant to rise to Marshal in Ranker's place when she retired?"

"There were rumours," I acknowledged. "You know, back before..."

I gesture vaguely, meaning a great many things but not in particular. She snorted in amusement.

"I looked up to her for that," Juniper said. "Even more than I did my mother, because my mother was never going to rise higher than she had. It wasn't like Istrid Knightsbane I wanted to be when I grew up, Catherine. It was like Grem and Ranker and Nim. The Marshals. And Sacker, she had the stuff. The marshals knew it, so the Carrion Lord. If things had turned out different, it could be her serving as the Tower's greatest captain instead of Nim."

"A lot of things could have gone differently," I said.

My hand half-rose to the cloth covering the eye sloppiness had cost me before I forced it down. Some mistakes stayed with you longer than others. I found Juniper's gaze had moved to me, catching sight of the aborted movement, and I flushed in embarrassment. Those kinds of regrets I preferred kept unseen from even my friends.

"It's an eye, Catherine," Juniper said. "Just an eye. You could lose both and still be who you are. And that's what eats at me. When did you know?"

"Know what?"

Her gaze was alight with something I could not quite name.

"Who you were," Juniper gravelled. "We've hung titles around your neck like necklaces at a summer fair, Warlord. Countess. Squire.

Arch-heretic of the East. Black Queen, Queen of Lost and Found, of Winter, of the Hunt. First Under the Night. But before that, when did you *know*?"

Half a dozen answers, some flippant and others rote, came to the tip of my tongue. I could not get any of them out, not meeting her eyes with my last remaining one. Seeing the cast of her face in the last gaps of the day, the despair and the hunger that burned in her eyes. I did love her, Juniper. My own Hellhound. As deeply as I did the Woe. I'd loved her as the hard-eyed foe I had to overcome to prove myself worthy of my father's tutelage, when we'd both been children, and I loved her now as the woman who'd built a kingdom and an army with me. So I stayed silent, for a long moment, and told her the truth.

"In the Everdark," I quietly said. "There was..."

I swallowed. I'd never spoken of this to anyone, not even Hakram. The words did not come easy. Was there a way in any language ever made that I could truly explain what they had been, the last moments of the battle in Great Strycht?

"I lost," I finally said, tone quiet. "They carved me open, Juniper, and all the power and the death and the madness I'd gorged myself on came pouring back out."

I looked down and found my hand was shaking a bit. I had come to understand the Sisters, and they me, but that had been after. *After*.

"It was like blinders went off my eyes," I murmured. "And Gods, but I had done so many horrible things. More of them were all I could see ahead, and I was just so fucking *tired*. So I went down."

I closed my fingers into a fist, to kill the tremors.

"And I stayed down, waiting to choke in the snow."

I heard the sharp intake of breath.

"But I didn't," I murmured. "It took too long, you see. Snow melted enough I could breathe. And I still wanted to stay down, to sleep, but I just..."

I laughed, as mirthlessly as she had.

"It was a choice," I said. "And there was nothing weighing the balance either way. So I ask myself, why not?"

I tightened my cloak around my shoulders, shivering.

"And then?" Juniper quietly asked.

"And then I got up," I softly smiled. "And I think that's what stayed with me, Juniper. The even balance and the question and the choice I made. And it's gone to shit since, you know. Death and doom and the age falling down on our heads. And every day the same choice is there waiting to be made: lie down..."

"Or stand up," the Hellhound finished.

I nodded.

"I've stayed on my feet," I said. "I will, until I am either victorious or I die. I think that's what left of me, when you whittle away the rest."

Juniper looked away.

"I thought it'd be victory," the Hellhound admitted.

"It's never the victories that stay with you," I tiredly said.

Large fingers laid against the dead wood.

"No," the Marshal of Callow said, "I guess not."

A moment passed.

"You're looking west again."

"Ranker's dead," Juniper quietly said. "But Sacker's here. Nim is here. And Grem uses Sepulchral's army. Everyone who is or could be a Marshal of Praes."

I studied her, but her expression was hard to make out and her eyes stayed west.

"There's this thing I see, Catherine," she confessed. "The lay of it. Two hours I've watched the sappers, how quick they work. How quick the work will be done. And I know how quickly Nim's will work, and *ours* and..."

"And what?" I quietly asked.

"And there is a box," the Marshal of Callow said. "Where the battle will happen. I see it. It's where it'll all happen and we can shape it."

I could smell it the air, now. Victory. Yet Creation did not shiver, fate did not ripple like a lake in the wind, because this was not the writ of any Gods. It was just Juniper of the Red Shields, looking at a dusty field in the middle of nowhere and being the woman I'd glimpsed in her at seventeen.

"You want to fight," I said.

It was not a question.

"Sacker hasn't seen it," Juniper said, sounding disbelieving. "She can't have, not if she's raising those walls. Sacker hasn't seen it, and she could have been a Marshal."

Large fingers clawed at the thin bark of the dying sycamore. She turned to me.

"I could be wrong," she told me, tone anguished. "I could be just seeing what's not there. I've... these have not been good days, Catherine, and I did not stand up in the face of them. I need you to know that *I could be wrong*."

I would have answered, but she was not done. The words were spilling out of her like broken barrel.

"I feel like my entire life I've been drawing a bow," Juniper said. "And ever since I've been your marshal, I've just... stood there. And my hand's been trembling. But this? This place, this box, these foes?"

The hand left the tree and she pushed away, straightening her back.

"I can release the arrow," Juniper of the Red Shields said, pleaded. "I can win this. *Please*."

And I could have taken her by the arm, brought her close and told her that she did not need to win back my trust because she'd never lost it. But I knew, sure as dawn, that it was not what she wanted. Needed. And I was my father's daughter, so I offered her the very same grace I was once offered. My wrist snapped out and metal slapped against my palm.

I handed her a knife, pommel first.

"If you mean the words," I replied, "commit. Carve them."

Incomprehension, first, but I saw her eyes clear as she matched my gaze. I did not mean the plea, or the apology that came unspoken with it. Those were between us. What I wanted from her was conviction. The Hellhound leaned close to the tree, reaching inside, and carved. The strokes shook, at first, but grew certain. Her hand did not tremble. And when she withdrew, deep in the hollow of a dead tree waited these words: *Marshal Juniper wins here*. I smiled, startled.

"Here?" I asked, amused. "Exactly?"

"This tree is where we win," the Marshal of Callow said, tone even, "and everyone else loses."

She offered me back the knife, pommel first. I took it.

"Let's go home," I said. "It's getting late."

"Yeah," Juniper said, eyes red. "Let's go home, Catherine."

We'd left alone. We came back together.

—

"First, we shape the box," the Marshal of Callow said.

It was a surprisingly simple thing, when it came down to it. We had our palisade and trench from Kala Hills to the half-road, so the only way to go was south. The assumption in my head had been that it'd turn into a right angle facing the Rebel Legion line, but Juniper had seen otherwise. Sacker and her fellows had been clever in putting themselves between two forces that did not want to fight them, forcing them to dig in and confirm their position of kingmaker of this battlefield. The downside, though, was that the sappers of the Rebel Legions needed to dig their trench in both directions *simultaneously*. So we took advantage of that.

We began building westwards instead of south, a sloping line of defence headed towards Moule Hills. Immediately the Rebel Legions began trying to force us back by cutting through our path, keeping at the same distance neither of us had yet dared to break, but when they focused their efforts south the Loyalist Legions began pushing at them instead. Nim wasn't any more interested in giving them leverage than we were, after all.

"The slopes grow steeper further south of Moule Hills," the Hellhound said. "That leaves only a narrow passage through which they can move troops into the valley, if they attack. That will shape *where* they attack."

"Which we don't want them to," I pointed out.

"Indeed. So while we raise our works we have to delay," the Marshal of Callow said. "We must maintain the stalemate until Sepulchral's main host arrives."

She had notions as how that should be done, of course. The first was to put the Loyalist Legions on the backfoot by poisoning the source of water they'd been using since we cut them off from their supply lines: Nioqe Lake.

"We don't have anything that can poison a lake that large," I pragmatically said.

I'd pretty much kill the town of Risas as well, but I was less broken up about that when they'd been providing guides to Legion skirmishers. I'd offer them safe passage south through the territory I controlled, but I wasn't going to weep about them being driven out if we did it. Which I wasn't sure we could.



"We do," Juniper grunted, "for the same reason that we had to use that lake for water. Arcadian water can't be safely drunk."

A hundred knights, Masego and myself went for a ride. We tore through Akua's attempts to stop us and I opened a gate in the sky, making Nioqe Lake a third larger and entirely unusable for water supplies.

"Then slow the deserters," the Marshal of Callow said. "The moment their walls are up they can afford to start provoking us and strongarm the Black Knight."

She spent half a day with Pickler out in the field, studying the eastern slopes of Moule Hills, before asking me for Archer and the Huntress. Ballistas were moved, and then fired at the hillside exactly five times with the Named as spotters. The ensuing landslide didn't kill anyone that we saw, but it did drop down a least of tone of rock right in the middle of the way of the Rebel Legions. They'd have to clear them out before they could get back to work.

"So we hit the Loyalists, after that," I guessed.

"It's necessary and they had to be last," the Hellhound said. "By now they've used all their sudes to match our wall and the deserters'. But we don't want them to be able to keep fortifying over the next few days, they would encircle Sepulchral's camp with walls entirely. Thankfully, their wood reserves were used to make the ring of forts around the Aksum camp, so they are now entirely dependent on the wood cut down in Kala Hills."

"So what do we do, drive them out?" I asked.

"That would be too costly," Juniper replied. "There is another way. It hasn't rained in days. All you have to do, Catherine, is live up to your reputation."

We set fire to the damned hills. Masego and I with large columns of blackflame, but it wasn't only us. Indrani and Alexis shot fire arrows, a raiding party with Squire and Apprentice started a swath with torches and fire spells. The blaze got out of control when the wind turned, burnt a chunk of the hills under our control as well, but for the better part of the day the wind had blown north. The Legions weren't going to get anything but ash out of those hills.

"The Black Knight will dismantle Ogarin for spare parts," the Marshal of Callow noted, "but that will take time and the townsfolk will resist. It should buy us long enough."

—

It did.

Sepulchral had been six days as well, and we kept the stalemate going just long enough. Our wall was anchored on the slopes of Moule Hills, facing that of the Rebel Legions, while to the north the Black Knight had hemmed them in as well. Envoys had gone back and forth between those camps, but no alliance against the Army of Callow had emerged. We'd kept them on the backfoot until Sepulchral arrived from the west with the rest of her twenty-thousand strong army. The Loyalist Legions had not finished their encirclement of the camp up in Moule Hills, and so they were forced to evacuate the sole fort in the way of Sepulchral linking her forces together late in the sixth day.

And so, at least, everyone was here.

"My agents in the Rebel Legion camp tell me that the talks with Marshal Nim are souring," Scribe told me the same day, in my tent.

"She's still not budging?" I asked.

"She has promised to extract of Malicia promises to make suborning officers of the Legions of Terror with mind control spells," Scribe said, "but she still refuses to turn on the Tower in any significant manner. Now there is division among their generals. Sacker is pushing for their force to declare in favour of Amadeus as Dread Emperor, but Mok is strongly opposed. He instead argues that if further concessions are extracted from Malicia, safeguarding the sanctity of the Legions, their reasons for breaking with the Tower no longer exist."

"Jaiyana Seket?" I asked.

"Hedging," Scribe grimaced. "There's not telling which way she'll end up leaning."

I breathed out. General Mok was arguing to rejoin Malicia's cause, essentially. And he'd never bothered to pretend he was anything but hostile to my presence in Praes, or indeed the Grand Alliance's concerns about the Dread Empire. I'd warned them that my tolerance had limits.

"Have assassin kill Mok," I said. "Frame Sepulchral for it if you can."

"That should be-" Scribe began, but she was interrupted when Vivienne blew into my tent.

I cocked an eyebrow at my successor, who was looking rather harried.

"Viv?"

"Trouble," she said. "I have a fresh word from the Jacks. General Mok was killed an hour ago."

I glanced at Scribe, but she shook her head. I supposed not even the Webweaver worked that fast.

"Where's the trouble?" I asked.

"General Seket got killed as well and they caught the people who supposedly killed both," Vivienne said.

I swore furiously.

"They caught Jacks, didn't they?" I asked.

She nodded.

"It's... bad, Catherine," she said. "There's been brawls in their camp, people are saying this is a coup by Sacker done with our backing. That she's planning to sell out Praes to the Grand Alliance."

I swore again.

"If I may hazard a guess," Scribe mildly said, "the figurehead of this belief will be the senior legate for either Mok or Jaiyana Seket?"

Vivienne looked startled.

"Mok," she confirmed.

I leaned back into my seat, closing my eyes and rubbing the bridge of my nose. Well, that was a particularly convenient turn for the Tower wasn't it?

"Fuck," I said. "Malicia played us."

She'd whipped the deserters into a frenzy against us just before a battle was to erupt and the seniormost officer with a clean reputation was most likely in her pocket. Maybe if there were a few days or a week for things to calm down this could be straightened out, but we wouldn't get that long. *Ten to one odds she had something nasty cooked up for Sepulchral's army too*, I thought.

"Tomorrow we have a battle on our hands," I plainly said. "We need to pull off your plan *tonight*, Vivienne. Can it be done?"

She grimaced.

"I would have liked a day or two longer, to make contact with the right people," she admitted. "But it is not impossible."

"Then go get your cloak, we move with nightfall," I said. "I'll need you to inform Juniper, Scribe, because come dawn the blades will finally come out."

## Chapter 19: Vivienne's Plan (Redux)

*"A superior strategic plan can fail on tactical grounds should decision-making in battle be disconnected from strategic concerns. This is why training officers to understand these concerns is a priority for a modern army, and the foundation of our manner of warfare."*

*– Extract from "The Modern Legion", a treatise by Marshal Ranker*

The Thirteenth Legion was something older Callowans avoided talking about.

My generation didn't care about it as much, since we'd been raised to Legion garrisons and imperial governors, but I'd served drinks to enough soldiers that'd served during the Conquest – on either side – to hear the whole gauntlet of opinions on Legio XIII, *Auxilia*. Most of my people knew the basics, that it was a legion raised almost entirely out of native Callowans that'd sided with the Dread Empire either during or after the Conquest. Bandits and rebels, people called them, and a lot of things nowhere as nice. Led by General Jeremiah Holt, who'd once been *Sir* Jeremiah Holt, they'd not actually done much to help the fall of Callow when Praes invaded and only become a formal legion afterwards. Their main assignment over the following decades had been garrisoning Thalassina, but they'd done a few stints elsewhere in Praes. Never, however, back in Callow.

The thing was, some of the older soldiers who'd fought under the Fairfaxes actually had complicated feelings about Jeremiah Holt. The man was nearly seventy now and he'd been called a traitor for forty years but in his youth a lot of people had seen him as somewhat of a romantic figure. He'd been a rebel against the crown, sure, but before the Conquest the situation in Callow had been a lot more complicated than my people cared to remember. For all that Callowans like to pretend that the years before the Praesi rolled in had been a flawless golden age where our wise and benevolent Fairfaxes rulers had been beloved overlords, that was ignoring the realities of it. They'd been a popular dynasty, the Fairfaxes, but they'd also been two reigns removed from a brutal internal civil war and that sort of thing left *marks*.

The War of Cousins had shaken up the balance of power in Old Callow, with two branches of House Fairfax twining the line with respectively the Caens of Liesse and the Sarsfields of Summerholm before taking swings at each other for control of the throne. There was a lot to say about that civil war, but ironically

what mattered most was the people *not* mentioned in the writings about it: the northern baronies of Hedge and Harrow. They'd stayed aloof throughout the entire war, same as they'd been during the Conquest, because by the time that branch of House Fairfax my father destroyed came to the throne the north had effectively become a realm within a realm. With the power increasingly gathering in Laure, Summerholm and Liesse northerners had started resenting the authority of a distant crown that little aside from collecting taxes.

Enter Good King Robert, last true Fairfax king of Callow, and Sir Jeremiah Holt of the Order of the Antlers. The estrangement between the north and throne had sunk deep enough that Holt, a bold young knight of northern extraction, had rebelled against King Robert to seek the independence of the northern baronies and parts of the territory now under Southpool. He'd been fighting for the restoration of the 'Kingdom of Dunloch', the ancient northern realm that the Albans had conquered before turning to the last holdout of the Kingdom of Liesse in the south. The historical grounds for that rebellion were pretty thin, considering that before the Albans annexed the north it'd been more of an alliance under a prominent warchief than a proper kingdom and said warchief *had* surrendered in exchange for being named Duchess of Dunloch. Resentment of Laure had been strong enough up north, though, that Holt found more than a few knights and soldiers flocking to his banner when he raised it.

Their rebellion had been rather tame, very knightly. It'd been more a play of fox-and-hound with the Fairfaxes than the kind of violent resistance that'd followed the Conquest. Unfortunately, after a few humiliations too many King Robert had gotten serious about putting them down and bodies had started piling up. Holt lost most of his rebel troops and had to go increasingly bandit to stay in the fight, which tarred his reputation. Enter the Conquest and bandits popping up everywhere as troops marched east, leaving everyone's holdings unprotected. A much grimmer Jeremiah Holt saw his opportunity. He'd been halfway to gathering a sizeable army of malcontents and robbers when Amadeus of the Green Stretch had reached out with an offer to him.

Self-rule for the northern baronies so long as Holt entered imperial service, as well as a formal military office for him and his men. Jeremiah Holt took the offer, famously, and slew a few hundred soldiers under the Count of Ankou before capturing the man himself and keeping the city out of the war by threatening to hang him his noble prisoner should anyone pass the city gates.

He'd never quite been forgiven for that by the older generation. Having one of their romantic heroes shake hands with the Black Knight and rise to the rank of general in the Legions of Terror in the aftermath had been one of the many hits the pride of Callow had taken after the Conquest. It'd been striking enough

that I'd been surprised to learn after joining the Legions that there were songs about Holt – two of them, a sad one called 'O Knight of Dunloch' and a merry one called 'The Ride at Luthien's Crossing' – because I'd never heard either of them sung. I tended to believe that if he'd ever been allowed to serve as a garrison in Callow his star would have risen, especially if he checked the abuse of an imperial governor, but then that was likely why my father had assigned the Thirteenth duties on the other side of the empire.

Today's Thirteenth Legion wasn't the same that'd formed during the Conquest, of course. Most those soldiers were either dead or retired, with the holdouts being high-ranking officers whose position wouldn't require much fighting. But unlike other legions, the Thirteenth had become something a family trade while out east. Children and grandchildren of the original soldiers and officers made up most of the ranks, and while many of my people wouldn't consider them countrymen the soldiers themselves believed differently. Praesi tended to call them Duni, but for all that the soldiers of the Thirteenth were now often mixed blood – not only Taghreb and Soninke but also from Ashur and the Free Cities – they largely considered themselves Callowans. An estranged tribe gone into exile, perhaps, but still Callowans.

And on that hinged Vivienne's plan, because there was nothing more exiles wanted than to come home.

It hadn't been easy to get into the camp. We'd approached under the cover of Night as well as night, but regular patrols and a solid ward layout had still slowed us down to a crawl. It'd been a game of patience, which had irked me considering the looming battle and how impatient to get this done it was making me. We'd eventually slipped in, though, if much later than I would have preferred: past Early Bell. Most the camp was still asleep but one of Vivienne's spies had made contact with the legion's junior legate, Alice Burnley, and it paid off exactly the way it was supposed to. Within half an hour of our arrival, the Thirteenth's senior officers were shaken awake and summoned to an impromptu war council in the usual tent.

Where Vivienne and I waited seated in a dark corner, cloaked, as officers filed in one after another and the sturdy, grim-faced Legate Burnley fielded questions about the summons by deferring until the general was there. Jeremiah Holt was the last to come and I took a moment to study him from under my hood. Still built like a bull even at his late age, he was blue-eyed with a crooked nose and white hair that'd fallen atop his head. He moved gingerly but with assurance, for all that he seemed rather tired from being woken up at this hour.

"What's this about, Alice?" General Holt asked. "Your messengers were tight-lipped about everything but the urgent need."

His eyes moved to us, our shrouded silhouettes in the corner.

"Eyes of the Empire?" he asked.

I smiled in the dark and struck a match, revealing up my one-eyed face just long enough to light up my pipe. I pulled at the wakeleaf, breathing in deep and blowing it out in a long stream, as the half of the room that'd caught sight of the telltale details froze. Jeremiah Holt was one of them, but his surprise did not last long. He straightened, hand casually coming to rest on the dagger at his side.

"Good evening, Your Majesty," the general of the Thirteenth evenly said.

"General Jeremiah," I nonchalantly replied.

Half a dozen swords were out in the heartbeat that followed but their leader snorted at them.

"Put that away, you fools," he said. "If they'd come for blood it would already be on the floor. If Alice let them in it'll be for talks."

His eyes went to Vivienne's silhouette.

"Would that be the Webweaver or Princess Vivienne with you?" he asked.

Vivienne rose to her feet, pulling back her hood.

"You are quick to adjust," my successor praised.

"I'd been wondering if one of you would come," General Jeremiah said. "Nim believed not, but she's always been better at reading the east than the west."

"They're here to make an offer, Jeremiah," Legate Alice said. "I got oaths through the Jacks that blood won't be spilled even if we refuse it."

Blue eyes went to me, following the plume of smoke leaving my lips.

"And will those oaths hold, Black Queen?" he boldly asked.

"I keep to my word," I simply said. "Good or ill. Have any of you heard otherwise?"

None refused me that. For all that I'd turned my back on the Empire, I was known to keep my promises. It was a reputation that'd cost me much to maintain but moment like this were why it had been a worthwhile investment. There were a dozen people in here, most above fifty but a few closer to thirty, and the

tension went out of them all when I backed up Legate Alice's words. The white-haired general snorted again, going to pour himself a cup of spiced wine before dropping into the seat at the head of the table.

"Let's hear it, then," General Jeremiah said, tone deceptively light. "What is it that you're offering for us to tun on the Tower?"

There were murmurs, in the wake of his words, but no one bared the swords already returned to their sheaths. I laughed.

"Are you saying you no longer consider yourselves loyal subjects of the crown of Callow?" I mused. "A most surprising turn."

There were a few chuckles but many more wolfish smiles. They had no love for my crown, these men and women. The few that'd once lived under the rule of Laure had been outlaws to it. But neither were they the Tower's folk, because they'd never been allowed to be. The reason one legion had been left to garrison a wealthy city like Thalassina for so long without fear of corruption was that the Thirteenth was as estranged from Praes as it was from Callow. Even after a generation of living east of the Wasaliti they were still strangers in these lands, distant from its factional struggles. I glanced at Vivienne and she inclined her head. She was to take the lead: it was her plan and so hers to execute.

"You know who I am," Vivienne Dartwick said. "I am now a princess, heiress to the throne in Laure, but I was once the Thief and a rebel of the Lone Swordsman's band."

"A hero who fought to restore the same throne many of us fought against," General Jeremiah bluntly said.

"There are no Fairfaxes left, Holt," Vivienne replied just as bluntly. "The Kingdom of Callow that will stand when this war ends will not be the same as it was in old days. Your war ended when Amadeus the Black opened the throat of the last of that line in a cradle. You have *won* it."

A dark-haired man in his early fifties who by his uniform should be the senior legate of the legion, Eldon Hawley, broke in.

"Why's it you doing the talking?" Legate Hawley challenged. "Princess you are, but it's the queen who rules. What are your words worth, Dartwick?"

Some approving mutters followed, as well as glances at me. In the dark they could see little more than the red burn of my lit pipe and the smoke wreathing me, but it was enough. Vivienne stood in the light, upright and bearing a silver circlet, but the hard truth was that it wasn't her reputation that had these people



willing to hear us out. There was nothing I could do about that, though, without making it worse. It was a hurdle she had to overcome herself.

"I'm the one talking because I'll be the one dealing with you in twenty years, legate," Vivienne replied, unflinching. "You're trying to make it a slight, but it is the very opposite."

She did not elaborate. The general let out an approving grunt, eyes considering.

"It's not a bribe and a pat on the back you're offering us, then," he said. "You're in it for the long haul, and the long haul for Callow is you on the throne."

Understanding spread through those that hadn't followed along, interest coming with it. This lot had been offered many a bribe, in Thalassina. The Kebdana and their great vassals had been some of the wealthiest people in Praes. They'd not taken them then and they would not now. Gold wasn't what any of these people were after.

"You have grievances with the throne in Laure and I'll not speak to the justice or injustice of them," Vivienne said. "It was before my time. But I tell you now that throne is dead and buried. What's left behind is Callow, and it is that same land that beckons you home."

"We've been out east for long, princess," a fair-haired woman said. "Some of us were born here. We have families, husbands and wives and children."

The blonde was Kachera Tribune for the Thirteenth, Sally Thoms, whose name might be right out of a Laure street but was deeply tanned from a Taghreb father who'd raised her in Thalassina. The city might be dead, but the ties were not. There were many in the Thirteenth so bound to Praes.

"And they will be welcome in Callow as well," Vivienne said.

It wasn't quite the right angle, I thought, and she saw it too from the hardening of a few faces.

"We've made homes here, princess," the Staff Tribune said. "You're asking us to abandon them and pretending it's a favour."

"Have you really?" I mildly asked.

Eyes went back to me. The Staff Tribune straightened, his close-cut grey hair lending him a certain presence under torchlight.

"We might not be Praesi-" he began.

"Duni," I softly interrupted. "That's what they call you, isn't it?"

He looked angry at being interrupted, but none denied what I said. They'd all heard the word before.

"That's all you'll ever be, out here," I said. "Useful servants. Serve for a dozen generations and it will mean nothing. You all know that already, you've seen it with mfuasa and they think more of those than you. Bad blood cannot be made into good blood, that's the way of the Wasteland. You have reached the summit of what you can aspire to in Praes. So the question left to ask is simple enough."

I shrugged.

"Are you satisfied?"

The silence was telling. Rebels and bandits were ever hungry men. I let the silence stand, passing the torch back to Vivienne.

"You sacrifice in going home, like all exiles," the princess of Callow said, tone honest. "I will not pretend otherwise. So let me speak to what you will gain instead."

That had a few leaning forward, those who'd struck closer to the bandit strains of the Thirteenth than the rebel ones. The ones with mercenary leanings.

"Amnesty for any crimes once committed in Callow-" Vivienne began, and already a few scoffed.

We'd known they would, but this step was necessary for the rest. General Jeremiah was studying her with a frown, as if wondering why she had so blundered.

"I take no alms from the throne in Laure," the Supply Tribune bit out. "It was no crime to buck the tyranny of Fairfax laws then and it needs no fucking forgiveness now."

"It does," Vivienne replied evenly, "as by ancient custom it is forbidden for an outlaw to hold or be granted a noble title."

That little sentence went off like a sharper in the tent. Even General Jeremiah, who'd not been known as *Sir* Jeremiah since the Order of the Antlers had stripped him of his rank, looked surprise. Legate Alice, who'd left our side to go stand with her fellow officers, was the one to voice her skepticism.

"Even out here we've heard that you two have been stamping out the old nobles," she said. "And now you're offering to make us of the same breed you want to smother? That seems like an ill fate awaiting us."

I bit my tongue, for though I wanted to reply it was not me who should speak. It was Vivienne that needed to draw the distinction between what had been the policies of my reign and what would be the policies of hers.

"Nobles got in our way, after we broke with the Tower," Vivienne said. "They were treated accordingly. Yet I'll not pursue that enmity into my reign. The territories that were cut out as imperial governorships under Amadeus the Black will remain administrative provinces with appointed governors, but under that authority I will raise nobles again."

I didn't like it, I honestly didn't, but it wasn't the same for her as it was for me. Vivienne was a Dartwick, minor nobility but still very much a noblewoman by birth, and she wouldn't come to the throne with the kind of baggage I brought. Orphan, apprentice to the Carrion Lord, villain. Nobles would actually be willing to work under her in a way they simply hadn't been for me. She wasn't going to undo the brutal work of centralization that my father and then myself had done, she knew better than that. That was the whole point of keeping governors: there would never again be dukes in Callow, that kind of power would only ever be held by the grace of the throne. Yet she was very much in favour of cultivating the presence of lesser nobles once more.

She had valid reasons to, I'd been forced to admit. Lesser nobility was how Callow had been able to maintain so many knights without bankrupting itself, pushing off the costs of that to noble families instead of making the state coffers bear it, and it was also a solution to our still chronic lack of qualified officials. Vivienne intended to turn my father's orphanages into schools under the aegis of the crown, but that would take years and it'd never work outside the largest cities in Callow. Until then, she'd be relying on spare sons and daughters of the nobility to serve – and even after, she'd keep using them as a balance to keep the power of her own Laure bureaucracy in line. She had learned from Malicia's reforms in Ater in a way I'd never thought to.

"Noble titles," General Jeremiah calmly said, but I saw the hunger in his eyes. "Would you care to elaborate, Princess Vivienne?"

"For you, the barony of Longcourt," the dark-haired princess replied. "Which you might not be familiar with."

"A week's travel north of Liesse," Jeremiah Holt calmly interrupted. "Known for its apple orchards, as I recall. The last baroness of Longcourt was a girl of fourteen that died at the Siege of Summerholm."

"She was," Vivienne said, hiding her surprise with some skill.

"The land was placed under the imperial governor in Liesse, but there are cadet branches to the family," the general said. "That title would come with enemies."

Vivienne smiled and so did I, pulling at my pipe. And there was where her cleverness had shined through. Because the dozen in this tent had already been high-ranking strangers in a foreign land before, made to step on toes just by being who they were. Half the reason they were even hearing us out was that they were sick of being in that role. They weren't eager to start being the same thing only after uprooting themselves across two rivers to a land most of them hadn't seen in decades if ever at all. Any of them picking up titles would make enemies of the relatives of the people who'd once held to those titles. This had been meant to be great hurdle, but Vivienne had instead managed to turn it into an asset.

"It does not," Vivienne said, "but it does come with a wedding. I believe your eldest grandson is yet unmarried?"

The old man blinked.

"He is," the general warily admitted.

"So is Holly Leyland, the eldest daughter of the man with the best claim to the title," Vivienne said. "Both have already agreed to unite the lines, should you and your grandson agree."

General Jeremiah seemed genuinely taken aback. My successor's gaze swept across the rest of the officers.

"I offer twenty lordships to be divvied up among you as you wish, but in truth that is the lesser part of my offer," she said.

She reached into her cloak, taking out a folded parchment and setting it down on their table.

"This is a list of sons and daughters from noble families in good standing that have agreed to marriage with officers of the Thirteenth or their descendance," the princess of Callow said. "Age and rank in succession are included."

The tent was as silent as a grave.

"This is not a trap," Vivienne Dartwick gently said. "When I speak of bringing you home, I mean every word. I am not the Tower, to strand you among enemies and then use the fear to weaken all beneath me. Come back to Callow, and you will truly be back. All the land offered is in what was once the Duchy of Liesse and now lies empty, but this will not be solely a noble's game. Freeholds will be provided to retiring soldiers and formal knighthood to any cavalymen who are willing to join the knightly order I will found – the Order of the Stolen Crown."

Kachera Tribune Thoms licked her lips then broke the silence.

"And what do you want in exchange?" she asked.

"Fight with us here," Vivienne said. "On this field. When we march east to bury death for good, fight with us still. And when the war ends, *come home*. Be part of the peace we'll all have fought for."

She'd hit all the right notes, I thought as I watched them teeter at the brink, and still had things been even just a little different this would not have enough. But the droplet that'd tip the cup was that Thalassina was gone. It was where the Thirteenth had been for the longest, and when that city had died to the Warlock's wrath many of the ties that bound the legion to the Wasteland had died with it. The same kin that they might have been afraid Malicia would kill as retribution to changing sides were already dead and buried. They had a lot less to lose now than they would have had five years ago and Vivienne had offered them more than they had ever hoped they might receive.

"We'll need to talk it over," Legate Hawley roughly said. "Bring more officers into it-"

I blew out a long stream of smoke.

"No," I said. "Tonight. You have until the hour's done to make your decision."

Some looked angry, but General Jeremiah was not one of them. If anything he looked approving. Smart man.

"Any longer than that and the Eyes will be onto us," he said. "You want us to march right now, don't you? Smash through the palisades while we have the element of surprise and link up with the Army of Callow."

I nodded. The moment the Thirteenth went over to our side or refused to, the Battle of Kala had effectively begun. When they moved all sides would begin to muster for combat, because to do anything else would be ceding the initiative to the opposition – and none of the four armies on the field were willing to do that, when all knew annihilation was just one mistake away.

"Come dawn there will be a battle," I said. "Now's the time to decide on which side of it you'll stand. You've heard what Princess Vivienne Dartwick offers you. You know what the Tower will give you and the worth of Malicia's promises. *Choose*."

It was not a simple choice and they did not simply make it. They gathered among each other, talking in low voices as they argued faults and merits. Vivienne retreated, coming to stand by my side, but neither of us spoke as we watched it unfold. It wasn't

the kind of plan I would have made, and my fingers itched to see it play out. It'd give power and wealth to people that I honestly considered to be pretty shitty and untrustworthy, but beyond that there was too much... give to this. Making nobles diluted the authority of the crown. Making several nobles, all with close ties to each other and in the same region, was making a potentially dangerous power bloc. I would have preferred cornering them, burning their ties to Malicia and taking them in on my own terms.

A third Gallowborne, to match the one I'd lost and the one I'd spent.

Vivienne wasn't me. It wasn't that she didn't see the same dangers I did, just that we didn't have the same... instincts about how to deal with them. She wasn't afraid of a Baron Jeremiah Holt because even if he grew powerful she was confident she would make him into an ally. Bring him into the fold, use that power to her advantage without needing to have something to hold over his head. And in someone who hadn't been with me for so long I would have been tempted to call it naivete, but Vivienne wasn't naïve. It was the same part of her that'd made her refrain from killing when she'd been the Thief, that'd seen her join the Woe when the odds were Callow would burn if she didn't. She was willing to embrace foes in ways that I just wasn't.

There was little of our old madness in Vivienne Dartwick, of the slights and long prices, and I could not help but feel that our people would be better off for it.

The officers of the Thirteenth chose, and they chose hope. They chose home and peace after the war. I saw it spread from one to another, the decision, until even the holdouts bents their heads and the same man who my people had once written songs about turned his blue eyes back to us.

"It has been," Jeremiah Holt softly said, "so very long since I saw home."

He breathed out shakily.

"An oath broken and an oath taken is a cheap price for that," he said.

"Then kneel," I said.

They did, but I did not rise. My hand touched Vivienne's side and she met my eye, looking almost startled. I almost snorted. As if I would reap the harvest she had sown. No, those oaths were hers. She had won them, she would keep them. And the officers of the Thirteenth, on their knees, spoke their oaths to the princess of Callow. And with every oath the world shivered, until the same rebel who'd once fought a throne now swore to another. Jeremiah

Holt spoke his oath, and when he swore to the princess of Callow the whole of Creation bore witness. Vivienne shivered too, the weight of the pivot pressing down on all our shoulders. Ah, I thought. Indrani had tried to tell me, hadn't she? I'd gone too deep, too... narrow trying to figure out who Vivienne was. I should have known that the simplicity had been at the hear of her the whole time.

Vivienne Dartwick had entered the tent as a princess, and now stood a Princess. It was a simple as that.

I almost laughed, seeing the hope and awe in those eyes, because didn't the Gods just love their little jests? Vivienne had once been a fine enough thief she'd earned a Name out of taking from Praes, and yet the greatest of her thefts only came now that she had left behind. As a girl, all she'd ever taken form the Dread Empire was coin and good. Now, though?

The Princess of Callow had stolen back an entire legion.

## Chapter 20: Malicia's Plan

*"Do I not defeat my enemies, when I mind control them into being my friends?"*

— Dread Emperor Imperious

The Battle of Kala began with three streaks of red light crisscrossing a dark sky.

Its prelude had taken place while most the Thirteenth still slept, hard men with sharp swords going into tents to end the lives of the soldiers the general staff believed would fight against rebellion. The purge was quick and bloody, followed by men being hastily roused, and the Thirteenth Legion began to move moments after a mage line sent up the lights that would inform the Army of Callow of our success. The legion left behind a significant chunk of its supplies and all of its siege engines: I'd heartily agreed with General Holt when he'd stated that the Thirteenth tried to leave with everything it would just get caught by the rest of the Loyalist Legions and rout. Treachery rarely made for strong morale, much less treachery interrupted halfway through.

The legion was not in a good position to turn on the others, no doubt a precaution of the Black Knight's. The valley between Moule and Kala Hills had sprouted fortifications in three sets. First the Rebel Legions', in an angled half-circle whose curve faced the east with its back anchored to Moule Hills. Then the mirroring sets of the Loyalist Legions and the Army of Callow, first running parallel from Kala Hills to the east until they reached the curve of the rebel trenches and then, still in a

rough mirror, curving around the half-circle. The Thirteenth Legion, while assigned to the front, had not been posted facing us. Instead it was to hold the curve of the loyalist trenches, facing the fortifications of the Rebel Legions. That made leaving a more complicated task than we would have liked.

It might be possible to cross the trench the Thirteenth guarded and then march down the no-man's-land down to my army's positions to the south, but that would be... risky. The Rebel Legions might think they were being attacked and start shooting. Considering two thirds of the triumvirate of generals that'd run that army had just gotten killed and the surviving third was discredited, I was inclined to think they were nervous enough to start shooting without thinking if they caught sight of movement. That left only the option of getting out the hard way: through the camp of the Eighth Legion, which held the western half of trenches facing my army's own. The three streaks of red light were meant to help with that chancy business and help they did.

Within moments, torches lit up the night as the Army of Callow began an assault on the Eighth Legion's position from the front.

General Jeremiah had offered both Vivienne and I horses, but while she rode with the old man and his general staff I held back. There would be retaliation when someone on the other side realized what was happening and I needed to be ready for it. I kept to the side of the army, its soldiers giving me a wide berth, and rode slowly as I kept an eye on the distant camp in Kala Hills. The camp of the Fourteenth, holding the eastern half of the central trenches, lit up with torches first at the sound of the fighting. The camp in the distance was not far behind, though, and maybe a quarter-hour later the rebel positions were alight as well. I shaped an eye out of Night and tossed it up above, keeping an eye on the battlefield as armies began to move.

Surprise was working to our advantage. The loyalist sappers had built their walls cleverly, keeping much of the half-road behind them, but that'd been turned to our advantage. The Thirteenth moved briskly down the road and smashed into the side of the Eighth's camp by surprise even as the legion was mustering to face an assault from the wrong direction. The rebels were staying out of it for now, probably wary of dipping a toe in this without having a better read on the situation, and I chewed on my lip as I loosely kept pace with the Thirteenth. I'd started trailing behind, wary of the hammer blow I'd expected but wasn't coming. My little eye in the sky was beginning to glimpse the shape of a rout, meanwhile.

The Eighth had been taken by surprise, out of position and attacked from two sides. Goblin munitions deployed to hold the trenches had stopped cold the advance of the Army of Callow but General Wheeler couldn't afford to pull away those men else



General Zola would resume the charges. When the Thirteenth ran into the first few companies thrown hastily in its way it had slowed, but it had now smashed its way through them and the Eighth's positions were collapsing. Too many of its legionaries were only half-dressed, and some enterprising souls from the Thirteenth had set fire to parts of the camp. Gods, at this rate we might actually destroy the Eighth as a fighting force. That'd be quite the coup, if one we'd not dared to hope for.

With one legion gone and one switching sides, the Black Knight would be –

"Ah," I grimly smiled as power bloomed in the heights to the north, "*there you are.*"

Night swirled around me in thick currents, terrifying my borrowed horse into trying to buck me off until I stole away a sliver to force calm into his simple mind. I wasn't seeing magic accreting anywhere yet, but it was only a matter of time until the enemy mages- my thought was interrupted by a subtle wave of power shivering across the Thirteenth. Instant. It'd been quick enough I'd not been able to do a fucking thing. And now legionaries were dropping to the ground, one after another. Like puppets with cut strings, just... falling to the ground. *Weeping Heavens*, I thought. What was this? The sorcery seemed to strike as if by random: it dropped ten soldiers in one company, thirty-three in another and then none in a third. Heart in my throat, I rode to a fallen soldier and unhorsed.

The rest of his tenth spread to make room for me, faces full of fear, and I swallowed a wince as I knelt in the dust by the dead man. Except, I realized a heartbeat after I undid the straps of the legionary's help, this was neither a man nor a corpse. The dark-skinned woman under the steel was still breathing, if faintly, though she looked sick and she was shivering with fever. I laid fingers on the side of her neck and found the skin slightly shrivelled but the pulse steady. I heard the soldiers around me began to salute and turned to cast a look at the approaching mounted silhouette of the fair-haired Kachera Tribune of the Thirteenth, Sally Thoms. She saluted me, after a beat of hesitation.

"Your Majesty," she said, stumbling over the unfamiliar address. "The general sends me to ask if you have any insight on this curse. It is crippling our offensive."

I looked away, my lone eye turning to the shallowly breathing woman I was still laying a hand on. Something about this was niggling away at me. The suddenness of the effect, unlike any war magic I'd ever seen, and the shrivelled skin. There was something familiar about this, somehow, but where would I have... Suddenly I breathed in.

"Tribune," I said. "The rations your legionaries have been eating, where have they been coming from?"

She looked surprised.

"You think us poisoned?" she asked.

My look grew impatient and she swallowed.

"Part is from our own stocks, ma'am, but half has been coming from the supply depot in the main camp," the Kachera Tribune said.

And there it was, good as confirmation. General Jeremiah had said that the Black Knight had not believed we'd approached him, but evidently she'd taken precautions anyways. And not just her, because I *had* seen this magic before. Just never used like this, and I moved my gaze back to the downed legionary so that the officer would not see triumph in my eye and misunderstand. I let it linger though, the taste of victory. Allowed myself to enjoy it. Because the last time Akua Sahelian had used that ritual, she'd left a few thousand Spears of Stygia dead and shrivelled husks before using the power to open a Lesser Breach. Now, instead, she had chosen to spare lives. To incapacitate instead of kill, even when the incentives were *many* to do otherwise.

All these corpses could be undead, right now, with the power she would have gotten back. Or she could be hammering away at the Thirteenth with a spell powerful enough that even I would struggle to protect the legion from it. Instead she has stayed her hand. Proved she was not the same woman she had been at First Llesse, even in the face of greater gains than those for the taking back then.

"I've seen this magic before," I said. "It won't kill them or continue to drain them. Light or healing sorcery should be able to fix most of the damage."

I followed her back to the general staff, after, though I sent up another Night eye to gauge the situation. Our overwhelming advantage had turned to ash in our hands in a matter of moments. At a guess I'd say that maybe a quarter of the Thirteenth had dropped under the ritual, punching holes everywhere in its formations and causing widespread chaos. The Eighth was using the time to consolidate its position and I could already see the Fourteenth moving towards the melee to reinforce. Considering the Army of Callow's attempts to breach the trench were still a bloody stalemate – Zola had gotten men to the palisades, but Wheeler had gotten his mage lines in position and was torching everything in sight – this now had the potential to go very badly for us.

I still had Night at my fingertips but I was hesitant to use it. It'd leave us exposed to a counterstroke from enemy mage cadres and I could solve one of our two problems at most. Either I'd slow the Fourteenth or blast our path south open, but I couldn't do *both*. Now quickly enough, anyway. I was still weighing the risks when I got to General Jeremiah and found that the choice had been made for me.

"Princess Vivienne is leading my cavalry in a delaying action against the Fourteenth," the old man said. "I if I might-"

I raised a hand to interrupt him, looking through my eye in the sky again. There she was, leading six hundred heavy cavalry against the Fourteenth's vanguard. The enemy looked to have been sloppy with composition, they'd gone heavy on crossbowmen and too light on regulars, but she was still outnumbered more than three to one. I held back my wince. I'd have to trust her, then, and do my own part. The Night eye turned to the positions in our way south. The trench and palisade were facing the wrong way to stop us, but General Wheeler was the veteran commander of a sapper-heavy legion: already there were stakes and mantlets put up in our way. Mage lines were waiting behind lines of regulars, the enemy general's intent plain enough to read. Now that the battle was turning in his favour, Wheeler wanted to keep us contained here until reinforcements arrived and we could be surrounded. Time for a reminder of who he was dealing with, perhaps.

"I have come a long way, through winding paths," I spoke in Crepuscular, voice rising in prayer. "Yet behold this barren realm, this crown of ruin!"

The Night roiled around, like a wind made of darkness, and I felt talons biting into my shoulders. I felt Komena smile against the side of my neck, pleased at the destruction to come.

"Let me match horror with horror, might with might, and know no master in this."

My limbs were trembling and the general staff had all backed away, looking at me in a mix of terror and fascination.

"So let the sun weep and the Crows have their due," I smiled, "for in the end all will be Night."

I'd only used this working once before, in Hainaut, and as the sky lit up with black fire I was reminded as to why. My vision swam, but I forced myself to finish it: I raised my hand, snapping my fingers, and the Hells were unleashed. A young black sun exploded, streaks of flame tearing through ground and men and shielding spells as screams filled the air. Black flame began to fall in a heavy rain, leaving only a horror of the dead and dying where once the Eighth had stood in our way.

"Your Majesty," General Jeremiah carefully said, "are you-"

I spat to the side, wiping my mouth. It tasted like vomit, though I'd not thrown up, and this wasn't even done. I raised my staff, the old general instantly going silent, and after pointing it at the horror swept it through. As it passed the black flames guttered out, leaving behind only great trails of smoke. I spat to the side again, leaning back tiredly in my saddle. Gods, my bad leg burned.

"Get your legion moving, Jeremiah Holt," I rasped out. "I don't have another one of those in me, not for a few hours."

It was another hour before we made it to safety, a full quarter of the Thirteenth Legion left behind either as corpses or prisoners, but we made it. I waited at the edge until our Princess made it back victorious, a makeshift banner for her knightly order flying high as thousands of throats cheered themselves hoarse.

Now the real battle could start.

—

By midmorning the lines in the sand were drawn.

The wounded had been seen to, the dead burned. I did not bother to send envoys to the Rebel Legions after I saw four crucified bodies hoisted atop their palisade: the same four Jacks who'd supposedly assassinated General Mok and Jaiyana Seket. I didn't know who was in command, Sacker or one of Malicia's plants, but whoever it was they were hostile. Yet the rebels had not returned to the loyalist fold, if the way both armies kept the trenches facing each other manned was any indication. It'd be a battle with four sides to it, not three. Our attempts to reach out to Sepulchral came to nothing: the Rebel Legions were running patrols and west of Moule Hills and shooting at our people on sight. I sent a pair of riders to take the long way around, but it'd be hours before they were anywhere near the Aksum camp and hours more before they could return to us with anything useful. No, when it came to Sepulchral's intentions we were still running blind. That had me somewhat uneasy.

"We've gamed out the engagements with all possible stances on her part," Juniper told me, unmoved. "Whether she stays holed up or goes on the offensive, she'll tie down largely the same number of loyalist troops anyway."

That sounded almost absurd, considering that with the defection of the Thirteenth in fact Dread Empress Sepulchral now commanded the largest of the four armies in Kala – around twenty thousand, even with the losses of her vanguard – but Juniper wasn't blowing hot air. The camp in the hills she'd taken for her own had easy

slopes down mostly facing the north and east, approaches where Marshal Nim had built forts in a since-broken attempt to encircle the camp. We expected a single legion to be assigned to defending those forts, the Eleventh, with the reserve being kept close just in case. Sepulchral led a traditional Praesi noble army, which meant they were pretty shit at taking fortifications if magic couldn't level the walls.

Good luck with that when Akua Sahelian was running the mages for the other side.

The Loyalist Legions certainly weren't going to *win* that fight, but the Black Knight honestly shouldn't be wrong in believing a single legion should be able to keep Sepulchral contained long enough for the fighting in the south to be settled. If no one else intervened, anyway. I sighed.

"Malicia will have something afoot in that camp," I said.

"Let the Tower have its tricks," the Hellhound said, "so long as we have the field."

There was little more left to do save hope it would end up as she'd said. We'd already tossed the dice, it was too late to have qualms. The legions and our army spent the time preparing for the fight all could smell in the air, but there was an odd sense of restraint. Like no one wanted to be the first to swing a sword and get the butcher's ball rolling. In the end, it was us who fired the first shot: Archer shot a legate from the Fourteenth who'd made the mistake of wandering too close to her range and with the woman's death rattle hostilities began. I wasn't actually fighting, to my mounting frustration. Masego and I were on the rampart of a fort, overlooking the battlefield and awaiting enemy magic. We were meant to be defensive assets for now, not go on the offensive, and though I knew the sense in it the sight below had my nails biting into wood.

It was a bloody slaughter.

First came the siege engines. The scorpions and ballistae of the enemy began pounding at our palisade, knocking down chunks where my mages did not reinforce quickly enough, and our own engines replied in kind. A heartbeat later the rebels entered the fray, and to my relief they'd picked a side: their own. They were firing at both the Army of Callow and the Loyalist Legions. Already I could see what Juniper had told me about, the 'box'. It was a corner, the square-shaped area where our fortifications were facing the loyalists to the north and the rebel to the west. The weak point of our defensive setup. Bombardment from both sides was already taking its toll, the sheer number of engines that facing two different sets of legions signified having an immediate impact.

Marshal Nim theoretically had the same weakness in her setup facing our own weak spot, but in practice she was better off: the Army of Callow had fewer siege machines spread out over a set of fortifications just as long.

"Are we simply going to fire at each other with machines all day?" Masego asked me, sounding pleased. "That sounds rather civilized."

"No," I sighed. "Now comes the bloody part, Zeze."

Rising from their cover in the trenches, legionaries climbed over the solid grounds and began charging at the enemy fortifications. They came for us and we for them. Across the great line splitting the valley, across the half-circle and its mirrors, men and women in legionary armour raised their shields and charged. From atop palisades mage lines began firing volleys of fireballs, crossbow companies filled the air with bolts. Down in the no-man's-land, screams and death bloomed. It was the kind of messy, ugly butchery that only came from well-trained forces hammering at each other. Legionaries tried to form testudo formations to take the edge off sorcery and arrows, but on all sides the same model of scorpions were turned on those attempts.

Those deadly bolts punched through shield and mail alike.

"They are not winning," Masego said.

I turned and found him frowning. Puzzled, and perhaps a little appalled.

"No one is winning," he continued, frown deepening.

*That's war*, I almost said.

"First we bleed," I said, "and then Juniper's plans begin."

The priests were giving us an edge, I saw as the hours passed. The body count kept mounting and the men grew tired, but the fighting continued. Twice rituals were attempted against us, but both times we shut them down. Light healing did not need time and carefulness the way mage healing did, which meant it could actually be done on the frontlines: this was a meat grinder for everyone, but unlike our enemies we could keep some of our men in the fight. We didn't have the numbers to fight a war of attrition against two sets of legions, though, which was why Juniper had made plans otherwise. So far everything had come down along fairly predictable lines, which meant now generalship would begin to matter.

Which turned out to be a problem, because against our predictions the Black Knight was moving the Seventh south to reinforce her battle line. Juniper and I had been sure the Black Knight's own

legion would be kept in reserve for hours yet, held back as a precaution in case Sepulchral ended up giving the Eleventh trouble. Four thousand fresh troops would be enough to breathe vigour into an attack on our defences, I thought, and already the melee between the trenches rested on a knife's edge.

"Fuck," I muttered, looking at the Seventh's dust trail rising high. "What do you know we don't, Black Knight?"

Leaving my post, I headed out to speak to Juniper and found she had an answer for me. Not out of any prodigious insight, but because the two envoys we'd sent this morning had turned back early and brought back news.

"There's fighting in Sepulchral's camp," Juniper growled.

"I'm guessing you don't mean the Eleventh is attacking it," I said.

She glared at me. Fair enough. Whatever Malicia's scheme had been in there, evidently it had crippled them as an army. It made sense that the Black Knight felt comfortable sending her reserve into battle if Sepulchral's twenty thousand were basically out of the fight. That was something of a problem.

"We need to get that army moving," I grimaced.

"Good of you to volunteer," the Hellhound replied.

"Not even queenship gets me out of the shit jobs," I sighed. "Should have aimed for empress."

Juniper snorted and gave me the Order of Broken Bells to lead. My knights weren't going to be charging trenches anytime soon, and the enemy's remaining horse was also still at large. I wasted no time, saddling up and riding at speed full south. Going all the way around Moule Hills to get to Sepulchral's camp would take hours, even riding horses, but there was no alternative. We passed by the silhouettes of the Rebel Legion camp in the hills, deep behind their valley fortifications, and I noted it did not look heavily defended. Sacker or whoever had usurped her command were putting their back into the valley battle. I could see the sense in it, even if it was Sacker that'd given the order.

The rebels didn't want to win the battle, they wanted everyone weakened to their bargaining position improved. Either Marshal Nim or myself winning would be an actual problem for them, they were sure to kneecap whoever pulled ahead.

We kept riding hard to the north, eventually finding the same path that Sepulchral's main host had taken to link up with its vanguard in the heights. There were wagons at the bottom of the slope and tents too, the camp having proved too small for the

whole army of the rebelling High Lady of Aksum. We got closer and immediately I winced: not only was there no picket to see us coming but what looked like supply wagons were actually being left unguarded. There were some soldiers at the bottom of the slope, maybe a few hundred, but they were disorganized and didn't actually notice us coming until we were in charging distance. Levies, I thought. Rubies to piglets those poor bastards were levies wanting to be left out of the mess in the heights.

Our arrival unsettled them but the shield wall they tried to make to discourage a charge was visibly shaky. I hadn't come here for a fight, though, so instead I whistled for an escort of knights to follow me and pulled ahead. It took a bit for them to realize I wanted to talk and then choose someone who would, but eventually a pair of middle-aged Soninke shuffled forward warily.

"I'm not here to kill you," I bluntly said. "I'm here to speak with Empress-Claimant Sepulchral."

A harsh laugh from one of the two.

"A little late for that," he said. "The old witch's finally dead."

It was easy to get them talking after some prodding. Apparently Abreha Mirembe had died overnight. Some had claimed it was old age that'd done her in, but both her designated heir Isoba Mirembe and his cousin Sanaa Mirembe claimed it to be assassination. They promptly accused each other of the deed, which had seen violence ensue. Sanaa Mirembe, sister of the same Fasili Mirembe who'd served Akua and died at the Doom, had proved to have many supporters among the Aksum men. Isoba, however, was engaged to the daughter of the High Lord of Nok: those troops had largely sided with him. Fighting had been breaking out all day with short breaks to negotiate, but the breaks were getting shorter and the fighting bloodier.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Malicia had fucked up that army pretty good. If I were a betting woman, I'd bet that Sanaa was the Tower's ringer in that fight but I couldn't be sure. Besides, in Malicia's shoes I wouldn't actually want Sanaa to win by too much if I wanted her to win at all. The costlier her victory, the less of a threat she would be after being called to heel. No, I decided, just having a ringer was too simple to be a plot of Malicia's. Better odds she had someone under Isoba as well, fanning the flames so that the factions would keep bleeding each other instead of coming to an arrangement. Worse, I couldn't see an easy way out of this. I wasn't sure I had the men to force Isoba's claim, I thought, and even if I did it'd take too long.

I needed that army to get marching an hour ago.

"Are they fighting right now?" I finally asked.



"No, they're still in talks," one of them said. "The moment they leave the tent and the corpse, though, they'll be back at-"

My eye sharpened.

"The corpse is still in there?" I pressed.

They nodded.

"It's why the truce is observed while in the tent."

I left them to that, riding away and back to the Order. Talbot came up to me but I ignored him, closing my eye to think. Would it work? *Could* it work?

"Your Majesty?" Brandon Talbot asked.

I opened my eye. It was my best shot.

"Form up," I said. "We're going into the camp."

I felt the weight of his gaze on me, but he did not question the wisdom of the decision. He was a reliable sort, Talbot. The way uphill was difficult, but the loyalist sappers had pretty obviously gentled the slope. It was usable, just not the kind of thing you ever want to lead a cavalry charge up through. Or any charge, honestly. We ran into actual defences the moment we reached the heights, at last. The division in the camp was pretty blatant, tents and furniture having been used to make makeshift barricades facing each other while bristling armed soldiers faced each other. I saw – and smelled, Gods take pity on my nose – that horses had been butchered by the hundreds while tied and their carcasses left to rot in the sun, but along with that horrid mess two parts of the camp were being avoided.

The first was a pavilion the size of a small castle and enchanted to look like one, which I assumed to have been Sepulchral's personal quarters. It was now neutral grounds for negotiation, however long *that* would last. The second was a maze of large cages of black iron, which only people in scarlet livery every came close to. I could see misshapen silhouettes within, some of them snapping at the servants in scarlet and others trying to claw their way out of the cage. Right, Aksum. The Cauldron of Monsters, once famous for its use of monsters in battle. At least the squabbling soldiers had been smart enough to stay clear of that. Neither side moved to block us as we formed up on the heights, but the repositioned to be prepared for a fight if it came down to it.

Gods, it better not. We didn't have the room for a charge and they'd bury us with corpses if they had to. No, I was going to put on the fancy hat and bargain my way into that tent. The Order was just here to... help temptations stay at bay. It took half an

hour for all my knights to make it up in the camp but I waited it out, only then riding forward with a small escort. Someone must have warned the squabbling Mirembé, because both of them came out of the tent with escorts of their own. I led Zombie towards them, pleased I wouldn't need to posture to get that talk after all, and sped up. Trumpets sounded, and I almost laughed at the pageantry – did I really require that kind of announcing? – before I realized they were coming from too far north.

The trumpets continued to sound the alarm.

“ATTACK,” shouts came in Mthethwa. “THE LEGIONS ARE HERE!”

Huh, that might actually end up to my- I caught sight of movement from the corner of my eye, feeling a ripple of magic. A small thing, repeated many a time. A few hundred cages had opened at once, and as my stomach dropped I saw a scaled beast the size of a battering ram slink out and taste the air with a forked tongue. Well, I thought, fuck. Magic rippled again but I almost laughed. What were they going to do, open the fucking cages twice? A heartbeat later a hold opened in the middle of the camp, the sides of it inscribed with runes.

“I really ought to know better by now,” I admitted.

At least I knew what Akua was going to do with that stolen power from earlier, I mused as a Lesser Breach screamed open and devils began pouring out. I sighed, cracking my neck and loosening my shoulder. Time to get to work, then.

After all, if it were easy what the Hells would they need *me* for?

## **Interlude: Juniper's Plan (Redux)**

*“Armies, like water, take the path of least resistance.”*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis II

They were wildly outnumbered, surrounded on all sides and faced with horrors most. It was, Grandmaster Brandon Talbot thought, just another day in the Black Queen's service.

He was already looking forward to the mad caper that would get – most of – them out of this alive. He turned to look at the Black Queen, who was grinning a hard grin that swept the doubts right off the frame of any knight close enough to see it. Confidence rippled out through the Order, passed from knight to knight like a whisper. And why wouldn't it? How many times had it seen them laugh in the face of death and leave victorious, that grin? *Once more*, Brandon Talbot fervently prayed. Brandon's queen cracked her neck then sighed.

"Well," the Queen of Callow drawled, "isn't this a right mess, Talbot?"

He swallowed a shit-eating grin. It was going to be one of *those*, then.

"Positively uncivilized, Your Majesty," he agreed.

"Ain't it just?" she said, the Laure drawl rearing up its head. "Now, looking at this situation before us, I can't help but feel that it's missing something."

"So much as a speck of godliness?" Brandon tried.

She snorted, then erupted into a small chuckle like he'd said a joke.

"Oh, Talbot," she mused, "the things you say sometimes."

A heartbeat's pause.

"What's missing, of course, is *more* monsters that want to kill everyone," the Queen of Callow nonchalantly told him. "So let's remedy that lack."

Brandon remembered a night when he'd been a boy and he'd snuck out of the manor in Marchford with his sister. It'd been summer and they'd gone out into the hills, bravely defeating sheep-shaped with wooden swords before collapsing exhausted in the grass and looking up at a sea of stars. He remembered the breeze, how warm it had been against his skin. That was what Night felt like to him, when the Black Queen used it – that warm breeze against his skin. There were goddesses behind that power and should they frown upon him he thought it might be a terrible thing to behold.

But they were passing fond, instead, and so he felt a warm summer night's breeze against his skin as the Queen of Callow ripped open a wide gate into Arcadia.

Just in time, for madness was seizing the enemy camp. Monsters were tearing into men, howling devils flying through in riotous flocks and for some godforsaken reason the Praesi were *still* fighting each other. On the others side of the gate Brandon glimpsed a screaming blizzard, but when the queen rode into the white he shouted orders to follow. The Order formed into a column and went through in good order, the edges of their formation hacking away at the monsters and devils that were already nipping away their ranks, but it was not long before all had passed through. The grandmaster had run regular drills with mages to be able to charge in and out of gates at the drop of a hat, considering how often it was being used a tactic these days.

The whipping winds almost deafened him as he cross, but not so much that when he approached his queen he could not hear her shouting. Squinting he tried to make out what she was looking at, finding with surprised it appeared to be fae. Maybe a half-dozen of them, riding on pale horses and looking utterly unconcerned by the cold. Was Queen Catherine making a bargain, an alliance? He spurred his mount closer to join her side.

"-and that smirk makes you look like an asshole," the Queen of Callow shouted. "I could kill you and all you friends with a hand tied behind my back, even if I had *no* fucking eyes."

Ah, Brandon thought. The fae were not only pale, they were *utterly livid*.

"How quick you are to give insult, when still protected by oath," one of the fae shouted, "yet if-"

There was a flash of boiling-hot Night and half the fae's face melted off.

"Boring," the Black Queen said. "Hope you have more friends, otherwise I won't even be able to work out an appetite for supper."

The fae screamed, which Brandon thought might be something worth worrying about before screams answered in the distance and he decided it was definitely something worth worrying about. Queen Catherine glanced at him, having finally noticed his presence.

"Ah, Talbot," she said. "Good, get the Order in formation. We're going to have get out of here in a hurry, I can feel at least a hundred of them coming."

She frowned, then cocked her head to a side.

"Damn, that's a Duke for sure and he feels *pissed*," the Black Queen gleefully said.

"I'll see to it, Your Majesty," Brandon said. "Are we to be fighting an enemy in particular?"

"We're going to take the big tent that looks like a castle," Queen Catherine said.

Ah, the one stinking of magic and heavily defended. He really should have been expecting that. The grandmaster of the Order of the Broken Bells saluted, and rode away to muster his knights.

The storm was getting worse and the fae angrier, leaving soon sounded just fine to him.

It was a graceless thing, this battle.

"All this shady shit they've pulled and still it comes down to the melee," Staff Tribune Ligaia muttered in disdain. "So much for the scheming witches."

Marshal Nim Mardottir grunted back, noncommittal. Her old friend – as much of a friend as a human could be – wasn't the first one today to grumble about the plots of the Empress and the Warlock and how they were staining the honour of what should have been a clean battle. She was, though, the first one to complain the scheming hadn't been effective *enough*. In both cases, the Black Knight tended to disagree. Malicia's surgical assassinations and hidden assets had paralyzed both the deserting legions and the Sepulchral rebels, though according to the Eyes even after being framed for an attempted coup Sacker had wiggled back her way to command by swearing to be hard on the Army of Callow. As for the Warlock's ritual against the Thirteenth, it had done more to improve Nim's opinion of the woman than weeks of smile and pretty talk.

It had been both effective and restrained, showing regard for the well-being of soldiers that'd served the Dread Empire loyally for decades before being led astray. More regard than the Tower had thus far shown for the legions that served it, one might argue. If one wanted to be hung a traitor.

"If we can rout Sepulchral's brats quick enough we can win this battle before nightfall," the Black Knight rumbled. "It'll cost us bloody, but I can see the writ."

A casual look at the melee raging across the valley showed only men dying pointlessly on a field. The deserters to the west, aggressively trying to bleed everyone else, while across the valley to the east the Legions of Terror and the Army of Callow lost hundreds every hour struggling over the same two hundred feet of solid ground. Casualties had been mounting all day, the Black Knight had already lost near two thousand. It was worse for the Callowans, though. Sacker was going after them hard with her siege engines and the Thirteenth's treachery had left them underequipped and tired from the night fighting. The Army of Callow would be the first to break. The Black Knight's gauntlet closed with grinding sound of metal on metal before she pushed down the swell of anger. She'd thought better of Jeremiah.

What had the Black Queen offered to turn him?

Sometimes it felt like she was the only person in Praes who gave a shit about the Dread Empire. Malicia was scheming herself into the grave, the Carrion Lord was setting fires left and right and all the while nobles were at each other's throats like the middle of a fucking invasion was the time to settle their grudges. Even the Legions, which should have been a pillar of stability, were

falling apart. Thousands had deserted over the mind control hook. It wasn't that Nim didn't understand the disgust, the sense of betrayal, but could Malicia really be blamed when half the damned Legions had gone the way of the Carrion Lord a year before? It was not madness, if it'd turned out necessary. Mok had argued it smacked of slavery, though, and not been wrong.

His offered bargain – returning to the fold in exchange for turning on Malicia – had been a damned silly thing anyway, and one Nim could not accept lest the Legions of Terror fall apart entirely. Malicia had given the order to keep stringing him along until Sepulchral was in place and Nim had done it, with a heavy heart but done it anyway. Mok had been a friend, once, but duty was duty. And when all the pieces had been in place the Empress had paralyzed one enemy army and turned another irremediably against Callow, over a day's span turning the Black Queen's position from superior to imperiled. No, the Empress had proved over and over that she was an able woman. But she was also one who still had implanted commands in the minds of hundreds of her own officers. They would only be removed at the end of the war. Nim should not begrudge that, given the stained record of loyalty of the Legions over the last few years. Should not.

Her gauntlets ground again.

"Ah, our beloved sorcerous overseer returns," Staff Tribune Ligaia muttered. "What glamour, what grace, what a stupid fucking thing to wear on a battlefield."

Snorting in an amusement, Nim turned to follow her subordinate's gaze. Lady Akua Sahelian, who some already called the Warlock even if the Powers had not yet granted her that in truth, was wearing an ornate red dress on a field where almost all the Named present were after her head. The Black Knight could not think of a goof reason for it, save possibly because Soninke highborn were all fucking mad and this one madder than most. Nim had yet to parse out Sahelian's game, what stood behind the warning about the pattern of three and that convincingly raw tirade about the Tower. She'd had confirmed the bit about the pattern, asked old friends who'd learned a few pieces of namelore.

Nim would have preferred relying on the learned folk of Husseil-Ossa, what humans called the Hall of Skulls, but none of the seventeen kings and the thirteen queens had far-lore to share on Names. Unsurprising. She had risen high enough among her people to know more had been lost over the centuries than the old crowns cared to admit. Human learning had been made to serve, instead, and human learning had said Akua Sahelian likely saved her life. This was not a pleasant position to be in, but these were not times for pleasantness. The Black Knight need only look to the three armies in Legion armour hacking at each other like animals on a dusty field to be reminded of that.

"Lady Black," the Warlock greeted her, offering a bow. "Staff Tribune Ligaia."

"The imperial's courts further south, in case you got lost," Ligaia scornfully said.

"As usual, Lady Ligaia, your helpfulness is as a balm upon my soul," the Warlock smiled back with seeming delight before her expression sobered. "I happen to bring more urgent news, Marshal."

The golden-eyed witch – Powers, that colour was eerie even on humans – turned to meet Nim's stare.

"The Lesser Breach has been closed," Sahelian said. "That should mean either Queen Catherine or the Hierophant are in the camp. I cannot think of any other here with the power to so quickly achieve this."

The ogre shook her head.

"The Hierophant's still out there," the Black Knight said.

She could feel him, through **Survey**. The aspect born out of decades of battles had become like an unearthly sense, an ability to take a single look at a battlefield and know what all the pieces in play were. The Black Knight had taken more than a week to learn to recognize the particular pulls at her instinct as being specific Named, but now that she had it took only a moment to find them. So long as they were 'visible', anyway, a nebulous distinction she still sometimes struggled with. The aspect had more esoteric applications besides, she'd learned, pairing with another to turn a simple trick of power into something entirely more deadly, yet such things must be used only with care. There were rules to fighting between Named that she was still only faintly aware of, no matter how many dreams of Amadeus' life the Powers saw fit to send her.

"Then it must be her," the Warlock said.

Nim wondered if the girl knew of the faint undertone of yearning that always crept in her voice when the Black Queen was brought up. It was the worse kept secret in Praes that the Queen of Callow and the Warlock had been sleeping together during their years abroad, but while most assumed it had been a coup on Sahelian's part to prepare her later betrayal the Black Knight believed otherwise. That break hadn't been a clean one, for all that the Warlock had bound her fate to the Tower's.

"Take the mage cadres and go support the Eleventh," the Marshal of Praes ordered her. "The Mirembé remnants pulling together would be trouble. You have my authority to take any measures necessary to ensure they do not, Warlock."

"How exciting," the golden-eyed witch drawled. "By your will then, o Black Knight."

Nim waved her away irritably. Sahelian was a viper, but she was a competent viper. If the Black Knight had to be saddled with a caster of that calibre – which were always trouble, the old Warlock had been too – it might as well be one who knew her business. Her attention returned to the battle in the valley, the bloody melee in three parts. The Army of Callow had edge ahead in the morning, the Black Knight thought, but now that Noon Bell had come and gone it was increasingly on the backfoot. An hour ago Nim had allowed free use of munitions on the front against the Callowans and the difference in stocks was beginning to tell.

Juniper of the Red Shields had clearly stacked the western corner of her defensive line, knowing it was the weak point, but the Black Knight was beginning to think the other woman had made a blunder. Her eastern flank was wavering. Already the Callowans had nearly been pushed back into their own trench and the pressure was only increasing. Had the young Marshal of Callow thinned her eastern flank at the expense of her western one, knowing the latter would bear the brunt of the casualties? The Black Knight could not deny what her own eyes were seeing, what her aspect kept drawing her attention to: there was an opening to take. Nim turned an eye to Ligaia.

"Pass the word," she said. "The Fourteenth is to mount an all-out assault on the eastern flank. Commit the reserves, mages are to turn to fully offensive fire and the siege to concentrate for a breach."

It would not matter if Sepulchral's brat had some sense beaten into them, the Black Knight thought. Not if the battle to the south was already won, and this campaign with it.

—

Juniper ripped into the dried mutton jerky, swallowing a mouthful of meat after barley chewing it. Gods but she'd been ravenous all day. She bit off another piece then paused halfway through chewing, turning to look at the woman to her side.

"Doesn't taste salted," she said.

Aisha wrinkled her nose.

"Swallow, Juniper," she said.

The Hellhound rolled her eyes but indulged her Staff Tribune. She then turned back an expectant gaze. Aisha smiled, pushing back a strand of that soft dark hair before answering.

"I had it washed and dried again," Aisha said.



Juniper, like most orcs, preferred meat without seasoning. It was a small thing, but it was those that spoke loudest. Juniper felt a sharp swell of fondness, one of those moments that always brought her dangerously close to thinking about biting that smooth neck and a hundred more things after that. Years of control kept her body from moving, though she noticed that Aisha had caught the glance to the neck and her lips quirked. Nothing was said of it, but the shared knowledge hung between them in the air. Dragging her eyes away, Juniper of the Red Shields turned her attention back to the battle in the distance. A look into her Baalite eye confirmed the trend she'd seen forming over the last half hour: the Fourteenth had committed to an all-out attack and the eastern flank was buckling.

As it should. She'd ordered General Zola to thin it.

"It's time," Juniper said, licking her chops. "Have the fallback order sent."

Aisha briskly nodded, rising from her seat to pass the order as Juniper stayed in her own and watched the eastern flank through the Baalite eye. Concentrated ballista fire had torn through chunks of the palisade and the Fourteenth, though green, was well-trained. Their backline was already bringing wooden planks to the fore that'd serve as makeshift bridges to cross the trench and allow legionaries pour through the breaches. Flags and sorcery had Zola informed now was the time to pull out and the general did what she could. Her legionaries had been getting pushed back into their own trench by the Fourteenth and that didn't leave a lot of room to maneuver. She got out those she could and began pulling away from the palisade.

The Fourteenth, howling and victorious, followed the retreating Army of Callow. Against most armies Juniper's counterstroke would have resulted into a rout, but this was the Legions of Terror. The young legionaries were not baited into a hasty pursuit, instead getting shouted back into line by sergeants and lieutenants, so when sixty feet behind the palisade they found the Army of Callow reformed into a shield wall the did not get scattered. Instead the Fourteenth formed its own shield wall in time and the lines collided. Juniper sucked at her teeth. It would hold, she decided. The Fourteenth needed to cross a trench and blown-up chunks of palisade to reinforce its own shield wall, effectively slowing its advance to a crawl.

The Fourteenth would be tied down there for hours with little to show for it, should nothing change. Good.

The Baalite eye moved to the northwest, where the Seventh Legion was marching down the road to reinforce. Nim would be sending her legion to back up the Fourteenth, the Hellhound knew, unless she found a better opening. Juniper just have to give her that opening, to heat up that old veteran's lizard blood and bait her

into going after a victory. Juniper rose to her feet to give the order herself, the one that'd most matter in this entire battle. It would be a rider that carried it, not flag or sorcery. Otherwise the Black Knight might smell the trap. And away the rider went as Juniper returned to her pavilion and her seat in the shade, Baalite eye tight in grasp and Aisha returned to her side.

"This is it," Juniper gravelled. "The knife's edge."

The moment that would make or break the Battle of Kala. Even as the situation on the eastern flank stabilized, the breaches stopped cold, the western corner began to waver. It'd been hammered at all morning from two sides by engines and legionaries, assaulted relentlessly. Thrice rituals had been aimed at smashing the palisades, only the Hierophant's intervention keeping the magic from breaking the stalemate. Bravely the legionaries of the Army of Callow had held, but now they were wavering. Their eastern flank had just been punched through by the Fourteenth and enemy soldiers were spilling around the shield wall, the Black Queen was nowhere in sight and the pressure was only increasing. They broke, first in singles and then in clumps.

That was, at least, what Juniper was trying to sell.

And that was the danger, the knife's edge, because a feigned retreat could so easily turn into a real one. Once soldiers got running, no matter the reason, it was hard to get them to stop. Juniper had built her box, even though its walls could not yet be seen, but it might yet be blown apart by the same men she meant to hold it. Pickler's sappers did what they were meant to, carpeting the grounds with smokers that obscured everyone's line of sight as legionaries ran and legionaries pursued. Not only the loyalist but after a few moments the rebels as well, a chunk of wall in front of them just as undefended. Sacker, Auntie Sacks, would order it. She couldn't afford to let Nim take those fortifications, else her plan of bleeding both sides would go up in flames.

The last thing the Rebel Legions wanted was to be penned in by the Loyalists Legions, meaning they had to take that palisade so the Eighth could not.

Smoke rose into the sky in great swaths and Juniper clutched the Baalite eye so tightly her knuckles paled. What would win out, the Marshal of Callow wondered. The fear, the instinct to run and keep running, or the trust? The Army of Callow had grown to trust its commanders, fighting on foreign fields, but the fear had grown too. Hadn't Juniper felt it herself, that poison that spread through the veins and blackened everything? More than just felt, she had wallowed in it. She'd glimpsed, though, a light on the horizon. A way to settle it all at last. The Hellhound leaned

forward, jaw shut tight as she looked at her soldiers move. *Haven't you ever wondered? Where we stand, compared to the best. We've fought Procerans and rebels and corpses, but this? This is the standard. The reigning champion. The mother we must murder to surpass.*

"Come on," the Marshal of Callow murmured in Kharsum. "It can be done. We can beat them. Trust me and we can *beat them all.*"

Soldiers ran, past the lines and the officers waiting with their whistles and shouts. Juniper's heart leapt up in throat, but it wasn't done. The same hard iron that'd seen the Army of Callow through the Camps and the Graveyard, through the Boot and Hainaut and dozen more battles, it told. Some kept running, but some fell into line. And that was all that was needed: a few people standing. Men gathered to them like a standard, lines firming, and Juniper began to laugh. In the distance, sappers began to raise mantlets. A box, formed out of the eastern corner of trenches and palisades and the second cornered the sappers were now making of wood. A box filled with smoke, and soon to be filled with only Named and her enemies. Juniper rose to her feet, passing the Baalite eye to Aisha.

"Juniper?" she asked.

"Look into it," the Hellhound said. "Northwest."

Aisha did.

"The Seventh Legion," Juniper stated, "is no longer moving to reinforce the Fourteenth. It's moving to reinforce the Eighth."

The dark-haired woman put down the Baalite eye after a moment, smiling.

"It is."

The Hellhound flashed her fangs at the horizon, triumphant.

"Where's that wagon with the roof again?" she asked. "I need a nap."

Aisha started in surprise.

"Catherine is not back from Sepulchral's camp, we don't know—"

"She chose me," Juniper said. "I choose her. She'll get it done, and that means the last decision that matters in this battle has already been made."

Juniper of the Red Shields, Marshal of Callow, walked out the pavilion with steps lighter than they had been in years.

"What the fuck is happening in there?"

Ligaia wasn't asking anything that the rest of the general staff wasn't silently wondering. The Black Knight surveyed the movement of her own troops, but she found nothing but the obvious. The Eighth Legion had entered the smoke and was engaged in a brutal melee against the Army of Callow and the deserters, Sacker pouring her soldiers into the grinder to make sure she wouldn't get enveloped by any single force. The Seventh was reinforcing, but the truth harder to swallow was that those reinforcements were *needed*. Between the casualties of the Thirteenth's treachery and the brutal blind fighting in the smoke the Eighth was getting mauled. Nim watched the movements of the troops, towering above her officers, and her fists began to grind.

"Ma'am," Senior Sapper Licker said, catching her attention. "We're at risk now. The deserters are still hitting our trench but we can't spare the men to hold it unless we send reinforcements from the Seventh. The flank's getting stretched too thin."

"Your recommendation?" Nim asked.

"Deploying goblinfire," Licker evenly said. "They'll answer in kind, but it'll lock down that entire front. We can focus our efforts on the breach in the smoke."

The Black Knight hesitated. Already she could make out currents in the battle. The Fourteenth was deadlocked, while her legions were pouring their strength into the smoky breach. So was Sacker, and with the main front of contention between the loyal legions and the deserters the tendency would only increase. *We have the advantage*, Nim reminded herself. The Seventh were fresh and the Army of Callow stretched thin, while Sacker's rebels were tightly packed – it would be difficult for them to mount a harder push because there simply wasn't enough room at the bottom of the hills for them to muster. Senior Sapper's Licker was going to make the breach into the fulcrum of this battle, but it was a fulcrum the Legions were best placed to triumph in.

It would get bloody, but it would get done.

"See it done," she ordered.

And with all of it resting on one breach, there was only one thing left. Nim would have to head into the smoke herself, lead the Seventh personally. Tempted as she was to **Delegate** one of her personal guard and guide them through **Survey**, her instincts ran against it. Half-hearted commitment here would be punished, she dimly felt.

"Ready the Warhammers," the Black Knight ordered. "I'll lead the push into the breach personally."

—

The Duke of Boreal Lights had been helpful enough to die taking out the Hellgate, but Brandon found the man's retinue decidedly less obliging.

"Why—"

He hacked into the flesh but the blue-skinned fae turned into ice, shattering and reforming.

"-won't—"

Even cutting the bastard thing's head off didn't help. It turned to mist and reformed, and then it had the gall to stab at him. Brandon slapped away the spear with his shield and stabbed it in the eye because, really, where was it getting the bloody nerve? It should have been dead six times over by now.

"-you—"

Oh and now the devils wanted a piece of him as well. The grandmaster slice through the wing of the howling monkey-creature and deftly led his charge to kick it after it fell, turning to parry a spear blow and smashing the fae's face with his shield with a grunt.

"-bloody—"

Oh, the broken nose didn't even come back even after it turned to mist. Brandon snarled, smashing its head repeatedly with his shield as the fae rocked back in pain and dismay.

"-DIE!"

The bottom of his shield went into the creature's skull with a wet squelch and finally it dropped to the ground. Panting but vindicated, Brandon turned to have a look around. The rebel Praesi had finally stopped fighting each other, after *only* half an hour of still hacking at their kin while the world went to the Hells, but the Eleventh Legion had reached the camp and even with the truce the defence was too disunited to drive it back. Outnumbered almost four to one, the legionaries were still making meat of the rebels — though it helped that the devils flying around everywhere avoided them like the plague and it'd started raining acid on their foes. That wasn't Brandon Talbot's problem, though. Now, where was the queen?

Ah, there she was. Near the castle-tent, fighting what looked like a pitch-black land octopus with suckers that spat out an acidic goo. A tower of black flame took care of that as Brandon rode to her side, pulling back his knights with him as he did — there was danger in stretching themselves too thin even of the

rebel Praesi seemed to be avoiding fighting them – but by the time he arrived she was tossing a dead fae in the path of a devil belching vivid red flames while trying to fend off what looked like... a hippogriff? No, not quite. He might never have seen one of those outside heraldry, but while the creature had horse's legs and tail it instead of a hawk-like appearance it had great crow's wings and head.

It also bit off the head of the queen's horse, before she stabbed it in the neck.

Brandon rode at a gallop, smashing into a devil that tried to fall upon the queen as she leapt with a loud grunt of pain from her dying horse to the monster and Night bloomed like a sickly wind. With a satisfying crunch he smashed the bloody thing's skull with the pommel of his sword even as another clawed at his armour with screams of pain and the hymns burned bright. By the time he was done, the queen was sitting astride the dead crow monster with a smugly satisfied look on her face. No, not dead Brandon saw. Undead, for it blinked and let out a happy screech that had him wincing in pain.

"This is mine now," the Black Queen happily announced, and a heartbeat later she was aflight.

Godsdamnit, Brandon thought, that was going to be just as bad as the damned fae flying horse. It'd been impossible to catch up to her when she rode that one, and at least that bloody thing hadn't had *claws*. He looked up, saw she was still headed for the great pavilion and rode after her with a sigh. Some Praesi household troops were in the way but it was nothing lances and a gallop couldn't disperse. He saw the queen disappear into the pavilion, which was a relief until he heard the fighting in there. He charged in with a wedge of a hundred behind him, smashing into what looked like a three-way brawl over a corpse. Sepulchral's squabbling heirs and a company of Legion heavies, led by-

Oh, the most beautiful woman Brandon had ever seen in his life. Would ever see in his life. He ought to dismount and kneel, to pledge service and love and-

"General Lucretia, if you don't stop glamouring my knights I'm going to feed you to my horse."

The warmth went out of the world. Brandon came back to himself, sweat drenching his back, and realized with shame that he'd been halfway out of the saddle. Many of his men had been no better. His fingers clenched around his sword. Another abomination best put to the sword, this smiling woman among the legionaries.

"Black Queen," the general spoke in a honeyed voice, "there is no need for-"

"I warned you," Catherine Foundling said, voice echoing of distant caws. **"Bite off your tongue."**

Power rippled out, and while the dark-skinned general shrieked and fled in a flap of dark wings as she spurted blood many of her legionaries ended up struggling with the same order. Brandon looked around and smirked. Some of the Praesi seemed to be struggling as well, but not a single knight of the Order had been affected.

"Forward," he shouted. "Forward and drive the Legions out!"

A shout forty years too late, but better than never. Even the Praesi rebels gathered themselves long enough to attain usefulness and they helped push out the legionaries, which retreated out of the pavilion after heavy losses. That did not, unsurprisingly, end hostilities. Brandon's queen had led her... mount near a corpse on a table made of solid gold and pearls, which seemed to rile up the Praesi. Two nobles – they had the look, the attitude and most of all the golden eyes – led the charge, loudly arguing though they refrained from violence.

"The succession of Aksum is no matter for outsiders, it is-"

"It is already decided," the boy lord shouted. "It was made official years ago, Sanaa, that I am heir. Your grasping attempts to pretend otherwise-"

"You are the creature of Nok, not a true Mireembe," Lady Sanaa scoffed, "and-"

"Gods Below, this might be the most terribly tedious shouting match I've ever heard," the Black Queen said, Night billowing around her. "Here's a solution: neither of you are in charge."

The staff of yew she always carried was lightly tapped on the corpse, which Brandon now saw was that of an old woman. The pressure of the Night went out and the body shuddered. This did not, unsurprisingly, seem to please the two squabbling nobles.

"It is against law for undead to hold any noble title," the young lord scoffed. "Do you think putting strings on a corpse will make it otherwise?"

"This is absurd," Lady Sanaa hissed. "For once, Isobe speaks truth. By what right do you meddle in our affairs?"

The Black Queen smiled, pleasant and mild, which had Brandon tensing. That was usually the smile that preceded corpses beginning to drop. Beneath her the crow-winged chimera stirred, looking up with cruel eyes, and in the magelights of the pavilion the dark fringes of the Mantle of Woe seemed to meld into the creature's feathers.

"By what right," the Queen of Callow softly said. "You lot keep asking me that, don't you? Nobles and officers and even Malicia herself. By what right do I meddle in the affairs of Praes, which is not mine to rule and a sovereign state beyond my reach?"

Her sole eye burned with feverish light.

"By what right?" the Black Queen hissed. "You dare ask me that, you pack of jackals who bleed Calernia as it struggles for its very right to exist, who writhe and bite and have a thousand times turned the east into a madhouse?"

The Praesi flinched away, but Brandon leaned forward with an eager smile. His knights too. They knew it well, that weight in the air. Had learned to love it, for though it was the herald of terrible things that terror was ever turned away from them. She was a queen in black, adorned in wrath and dread, but she was *their* queen to the bone.

Let all the world fear her, save the sons and daughters of Callow.

*"You made yourself my mess to handle,"* Catherine Foundling snarled. "That is my right. The east is your prison and I am your fucking warden, rattling the cage until you fall in line."

Brandon felt it then, the... pressure. It was suffocating and ever soul in the pavilion seemed to be choking on it. The queen through them all with her gaze, and wherever she looked knees buckled.

"So what will it be, Mireembe?" the Queen of Callow said. "How many of you do I need to butcher before the lesson sinks in?"

Silence was her answer.

"I thought so," Catherine Foundling quietly said. "Get up, Abreha."

The corpse did, looking around blearily. As if she'd just woken up from a long nap.

"Your Majesty?"

"Yes," the young woman smiled, "I am that. Now let's get this army moving, yes? We have work to do."

"I await your orders," the corpse said, bowing her head.

"First we're going to slap away the Eleventh," the Queen of Callow said, "but after that? Well, we're going to march."

"Where to?" the corpse of Abreha Mireembe asked.



"We're going to visit my old friend General Sacker," Catherine Foundling coldly smiled. "And remind her what happens when people cross me."

—

The hammer went down, pulverizing the sergeant and the legionary next to him. The Black Knight withdrew the weapon, shaking away the pulp as her Warhammers fanned out around her. The melee was turning to their advantage, as much as Nim could tell in this maze of smoke, but her instinct was pulling at her. Something was wrong. An arrow streaked through the smoke, which she tried to swat down but missed by an inch. One of her retinue screamed as it went through his eye, dropping to the ground and twitching.

"Archer," the Black Knight snarled.

She and the Silver Huntress had been scything through her soldiers and her personal guard alike, taking lives and then melting away before they could be caught. The sole time Nim had thought she'd caught the Huntress she'd run into the Barrow Sword instead, who had somehow managed to scar enchanted armour straight out of the Tower's vaults with a bronze sword. The Black Knight stomped through the smoke, sweeping away another handful of legionaries with a blow but finding no trace of the Archer. In the distance someone died in a flash of silver Light, the Huntress' signature.

Nim wouldn't fall for that again. Going hunting for them only ended up in her swinging at smoke while she took one arrow after another. None had penetrated the armour so far, but the Light would shatter the enchantment fully in time.

"Forward," the Black Knight shouted.

Her soldiers shouted back. There were more enemies ahead, full companies now, and the sound of sharpeners in the distance. The fighting grew harsh but they broke through, Nim leading the charge, until she made out distant shapes ahead. A wall? A few more steps forward, slapping away an arrow from the Archer come for her neck, and she realized it wasn't a wall. Not exactly. Mantlets had been placed as some kind of rough palisade, and before them she saw a sea of blood and flesh. Munitions and crossbow bolts shredded anyone that came close. What was this? She took another step forward, but she felt sharp pressure from her left. Nim backed away and a spell of blue light passed through where she'd just stood.

The Hierophant?

No, she thought as pressure came from the right this time and she caught a blade with her gauntleted hand. The Squire looked up at her through his helmet, blue eyes burning, and the Black Knight

felt her stomach drop. The boy had come for her, as Sahelian had warned. She tried to crush the sword but he ripped it free, dancing away from her hammer blow with speed he'd not had last time fought. Another arrow needed swatting away, and then as she tried to smash the Squire darting close a swirling spell of darkness seized her foot. She was pulled off her feet, and while she backhanded the Squire away he landed on his feet with his sword up. This wasn't a good fight, she thought, they had her swinging at ghosts and-

The Black Knight breathed in sharply. When had been the last time she'd slain a legionary with the marking of the Army of Callow? Often it was hard to tell in the smoke, but she couldn't recall. There'd been a few at first, isolated, but she'd been fighting for hours in the smoke now and it had been *long*. But no, that made no sense, why would Sacker commit so thoroughly to this breach if she was losing so many men? The Squire came for her from behind but she smashed her hammer into the ground, bumping him up and backhanding him away. An arrow wreathed in Light streaked for her side but the Black Knight screamed, smashing through it, and when a spell that was a blue drill of light struck at her armour it dispersed against the enchantments.

In the distance power bloomed, once and then twice, and though one disappeared the second struck close. Nim was half braced for a betrayal by the Warlock, but the magic that descended was not treacherous: a massive gale of wind blew, cutting through the smoke. Suddenly half the obscured battlefield was revealed, and what Nim **surveyed** with a single glance had her freezing. The Rebel Legions were being routed. Not only were their corpses carpeting the ground where the Seventh had broken their push, but in the distance smoke rose from where they camp was in Moule Hills. Had someone hit them from behind?

*Oh*, Nim thought. That was why Sacker had been committing to the push her. With her back aflame and only one way out – the goblinfire had closed the other – if she did not break through here her legions were at risk of being surrounded and slaughtered to the last. An arrow flew but this time the Black Knight saw it come from far and simply stepped out of the way, then punched through a wavy spell and swung at the Squire. The boy ducked out of the way and then slid under her, scoring a blow against her leg and cutting into her greaves, but she kicked him away and he went tumbling. She pursued, trying to end this even if lore said she might not, but he ducked behind a blood tree of all things.

Nim's hammer went right through, wood flying as the rotten thing half-collapsed. It was hollow, and though she was already aiming another blow at the Squire her aspect tugged at the corner of her eye. Inside the dead tree, words had been carved in Lower Miezán.

*Marshal Juniper wins here.*

Nim breathed in sharply, the Squire retreating as she slowed her steps. Looking around, the Black Knight could not see a single company of the Army of Callow on the field. Only manning the mantlets to the south and west, and in front of them piles of bodies were piled so high they were almost a second wall. It suddenly fell into place and marshal felt like she was going to be sick. The Marshal of Callow, Nim realized, had baited both her and Sacker into pushing their main offensive here, through this... box. And then she'd withdrawn her own soldiers to the edges, and let her enemies slaughter each other under the cover of smoke. They'd been fighting each other all afternoon, ruining their armies against each other as the Army of Callow mopped up the edges and waited. The Legions had lost, Nim thought. Rebel and loyal alike, they had lost – and they would continue losing as long as they fought.

There was only one word left to speak, she knew, before this day could end.

"Retreat," the Black Knight shouted, and it tasted like ashes in her mouth. "Retreat!"

## Chapter 21: Amadeus' Plan

*"Is there not a stark absurdity to what a battle truly is? Thousands of strangers on two sides of a field, prepared to slaughter each other because half a dozen men on either side told them to."*

*– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand*

Seen from the above, it was easy to understand why General Sacker had agreed to the cease-fire.

The Rebel Legions were like a bottled rat, now that the Black Knight had called for a retreat of her own army. Juniper had wasted no time surrounding their position in the valley, turning all engines on the tightly-packed ranks, and Sepulchral's own army had hit them in the back even more brutally at my order. Sacker's troops defending her camp had collapsed under the combine pressure of mage cadres and Nok wavemen, archers who lived up to their sharp reputation. It'd been a bloody business, feeding levies into Legion fortifications, but we'd caught the rebels unaware and the disparity in numbers had them collapsing in short order.

The camp was ours now, the parts we hadn't torched anyway. That'd left the Rebel Legions surrounded between steep hills, stripped of supplies and room to maneuver as the noose tightened around them. To annihilate Sacker's army, nothing would be required of the Army of Callow save that it hold its own palisades while at a generous advantage. All Juniper needed to do was wait while

Sepulchral hammered at the Rebel Legions from behind with her great numbers and fresh troops. The rat would be pressed against the bottom of the bottle, squeeze so tightly nothing was left but ground flesh and blood. So when the offer had come from Juniper, it'd only been natural that General Sacker accepted a cease-fire and talks.

Zombie the Seventh took nothing more than the pressure of my knees to be guided into a gentle downwards glide. The creature – she wasn't a hippogriff, not exactly, but given the similarities I was currently leaning towards 'hippocrow' – had proved to be eager and obedient after I'd raised her, perhaps because the Sisters had taken a personal interest in the process. Komena in particular had felt intrigued, enough to lend a hand to the process. Regardless, my latest Zombie had proved to be a very good girl indeed on top of being even quicker in flight than I'd thought she would be. Turns could get a little tricky, mind you, but Zombie clearly relied more on Creational laws than magical ones when it came to her flight.

Compared to my last flying mount, anyway.

The no-man's-land between our position and that of the rebels had been cleared for the duration of the talks, legionaries returning to hide behind their walls, and the empty space made it all the easier to pick out the delegations. Juniper didn't seem to have brought any officers with her, but she'd been wise enough to bring Indrani and Alexis as bodyguards. There wasn't a lot that'd be able to get past those two. Sacker, on the other hand, had with her two men with the painted insignias of senior legates on their armour. There were half a dozen regulars with them, but they might as well be decorations for what it mattered.

I landed half a hundred feet away, Zombie's arc smoothly turning into a run and slowing down as we approached. The Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, sword at my hip and yew staff lowered, I brought my mount to a halt before the delegations.

"Marshal Juniper," I smiled. "Congratulations are in order."

The Hellhound scoffed, but I could see the pleasure she was badly hiding.

"Could have gone better," Juniper said. "But we can save that talk for the camp, Warlord. There are more pressing matters to settle."

"So there are," I agreed, eye turning to the three top officers of the Rebel Legions.

"Black Queen," General Sacker blandly said. "Greetings."

Someone had remembered my warning, I noted. Good. I'd been completely serious.

"Sacker," I said.

"The legates with me are-"

"Irrelevant," I bluntly interrupted.

The human of the pair, a middle-aged Taghreb, looked furious at that. She didn't speak out, though. The orc seemed to take it in stride, which raised my esteem by a notch.

"Either you can speak for your entire set of legions or this conversation is pointless," I said. "I did not come here to indulge in petty games."

"I can speak for our men," General Sacker flatly said.

A look to the legates – the light caught in her fake eye, reminding me I was not the only woman here to have lost one – served as both a quell and confirmation. Neither gainsaid her.

"Good," I smiled.

"We're willing to surrender," the old goblin said, "under certain terms. Guarantees need to be made that no soldiers will be harmed. Regular food and water. We're willing to sit out the rest of this war if-"

She was serious, I realized. How many soldiers did she have left of the thirteen thousand she'd begun the day with? Couldn't be more than eight, after the beating they'd taken. And she still thought she was in a position to strongarm me. I'd been too soft on these people, I suddenly realize. The Rebel Legions had taken my coin and grain before selling me down the river without a second thought, and the way I'd just taken it had made them think I was easy pickings. I'd held back, out of a desire to maintain the armies of Praes for the greater war and out of respect for my father.

It was long past time I stopped.

"Archer," I said, "nock an arrow."

I heard a chuckle and did not need to turn to know she obeyed. I met Sacker's eyes evenly.

"You seem to have some grave misunderstandings about the nature of your situation," I said. "So let me be clear: if I tell Archer to fire that arrow eastwards, Sepulchral's army will resume its attack."

The goblin scoffed.

"You'd lose-"

"I don't give a shit how many of them we lose," I coldly said. "I'll spend her entire army if that's what it takes to break you."

I harshly laughed.

"Terms?" I mocked. "You'll sit out the war *if*? I didn't come here to negotiate with you, Sacker. I did that once before and you fine fellows me in the back. We're past making deals."

I struck my staff against the ground and the sound rippled out, dust flying up.

"You can surrender unconditionally," I said. "Or Archer will shoot that arrow and I'll fucking kill you all."

Sacker's face tightened, her ever half-closed eyes opening fully. She studied my face and whatever she found there had her hesitating. She turned to Juniper.

"And you have nothing to say to this, Marshal of Callow?" she pressed. "Your men will be the ones spent for this madness."

Juniper's face hardened and she bared pale fangs.

"Every sack of grain your soldiers ate, every crate of steel you used, could have kept some of my legionaries out west alive," the Hellhound growled. "And what did we get for it? Be careful now of calling on *sentiment*. You might not like what you let out of the cage."

Sacker flinched. Juniper had been as a niece to her, once. Maybe she still was in some ways. But personal ties cut both ways. She turned her eyes back to me, knowing better than to ask for anything out of the likes of Archer and the Huntress. Hells, of the two Alexis would probably be the hardliner. She had that traditional heroic disregard for the lives of anyone that might be considered to stand under Evil's banner.

"Many officers will balk," General Sacker told me. "If you do not offer guarantees-"

"So let them balk," I shrugged. "We can have this conversation again in half a bell, when I've put another few thousand in the ground."

The genuine indifference in my voice, I thought, was what got it through to her I wasn't bluffing. I absolutely wasn't. I'd just make sure that the household troops from Askum and Nok were the vanguard for the assault instead of the levies, to keep the casualties of the attack where they deserved to be. The goblin sagged.

"An hour," Sacker said. "Give me an hour to talk the officers into it without bloodshed."

I glanced at Juniper, who looked like she was biting down on the answer she wanted to give but did not have the authority to. No objections there, then. I might as well give the rebels a little more rope, lest the noose turning into an outright hanging.

"An hour," I agreed. "If I don't have your formal and unconditional surrender by the end of it..."

I did not finish the sentence, or particularly need to. Sacker and the legates left, tails between their legs, and returned to their lines.

I got my surrender before the time had passed.

—

"We are now victims of our own success," General Zola sadly said.

No one in the war council — our usual, save now with the addition of General Jeremiah Holt — argued with that, because it was the honest truth. We'd forced the Rebel Legions to surrender and the Loyalist Legions to retreat to their camp in northern Kala Hills, but we now had fresh problems on our hands. Namely, seven thousand eight hundred and seventy-nine prisoners of war that we needed to keep an eye on. And keep under a roof, fed and with enough water to live. We were effectively being forced to supply a second army of prisoners and our supplies would be stretched to a breaking point if we did. Much of the Rebel Legions' own foodstuff had been either burned or looted when Sepulchral's forces took their camp.

Some of that I could get back from them, but I didn't want to take too much. The Praesi law that undead could not hold noble title meant that Abreha Mirembe's hold on her own army was painfully fragile, holding mostly because the soldiers from Nok were going to stick around as long as it looked like Isobe was still going to inherit Aksum. Otherwise those forces would be marching away by now, leaving behind them a vicious Aksum civil war. No, I had to leave Sepulchral some of the goods. Asking back for half was reasonable, I decided, and I'd set Vivienne to arranging it.

"I prefer the troubles of a great victory to those of a great defeat," the Princess in question snorted. "We have supplies enough to push back the issue for a few days without it denting our reserves too much. We can keep our attention on more pressing matters."

Juniper cleared her throat.

"Speaking of," the Hellhound said. "Pickler, what is your timeline on the work?"

After the surrender came and the rebels laid down their weapons, there were only a few hours left before sundown. Since it was clear there'd be no more fighting for the day, Pickler had taken to bettering our position in anticipation of tomorrow. Companies of unarmed prisoners had, under the wary eye of our own legionaries, been set to taking down the enemy's fortifications: tearing down their palisades and filling their trenches.

"Our palisade will be the only one standing come dark," Sapper-General Pickler said, "but the trenches are harder work. Maybe half of it done in time, if we're lucky. I gave orders to focus on the road, it'll be easier for us to move troops across if we need to go on the offensive."

"Can goblin prisoners not be put to work in the dark?" Brandon Talbot asked.

I grimaced at that and wasn't the only one.

"They'll run," I said. "And do just that if we're lucky. They've a lot more goblins than we do, too, so even if we put our own goblin legionaries as overseers it'd be a major risk. Better to just left the work unfinished."

"Agreed," Juniper said. "It is only a precaution, regardless. I don't believe that Marshal Nim will be going on the offensive. Her losses appear to have been extensive."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"We got casualties estimates for her too, now?"

The tall orc nodded. With the casualties taken in the early skirmishes around the region, the desertion of the Thirteenth and the mauling the Eighth had taken during the night our guess had been that the Black Knight had been fielding an army about sixteen to seventeen thousand strong. How many were left now, though?

"At least five thousand and a half dead," the Hellhound said. "Tentatively we're pegging her current strength at eleven thousand."

I let out a low whistle. With the Thirteenth as last moment reinforcements, this morning we'd fielded around fifteen thousand men. Our butcher's bill had us at twelve thousand eight hundred and twelve soldiers now. Almost thirteen thousand strong. Gods, even Sepulchral had lost more men than we had: her twenty thousand had, between civil war and battle and desertions, tumbled down to maybe fifteen thousand now. Gods. Our total losses



had been less than half of those of every other army on the field *individually*, not even put together.

Juniper had, over the span of an afternoon, not upended the balance of power so much as murdered it and buried it in a shallow grave. Weeping Heavens. I found my glass of water, emptied it on the ground and leaned back my seat to grab a bottle of aragh. I poured myself a finger, then found a few grins and cups headed my way. When everyone had their own in hand, I solemnly raised my cup.

"To the Hellhound," I said, "and the Battle of Kala."

It was with rowdy cheer my toast was taken up, drinks going down and being poured anew. I met Juniper's eyes and grinned, enjoying the dark flush to her cheeks. Aisha even talked her into a cup of her own. I laid back into my seat, enjoying the warmth of the tent, and breathed out weeks of worry. They could be put to rest, for a few hours. We'd earned it.

After all, for all the troubles of victory I'd rather be in this tent tonight than any of the other three.

—

With morning came the time to make the difficult decisions.

The Black Knight still had a sizeable army holed up in Kala Hills, but so long as Sepulchral remained on our side the threat was mitigated. None of my general staff had an appetite for trying to force that camp immediately, especially not when leaving the Legions in it would make them wither on the vine. We'd poisoned Nioqe Lake and Nim herself had poisoned the main wells in the region, so in at most a week their water situation was going to start getting dangerous. Only the scale of the losses they'd taken in battle would prevent it from being an issue even earlier. Taking into consideration our numerical advantage — we had the Loyalist Legions outnumbered almost three to one — and our fortifications in the valley, it would be suicide for the Black Knight to attack us. That meant we had enough breathing room to handle our own internal troubles. The most urgent of them was, unsurprisingly, what to do with the several thousand prisoners we'd taken.

"We can't handle feeding them for the rest of the campaign," Aisha said. "And even if we could, we need to begin marching on Ater soon. There is no practical way to bring that many prisoners with us on the march."

"We should keep the officers of tribune rank and give the Fourth's Justice to the rest," Brandon Talbot advised.

Gods, that stupid name. It was what some of my men had taken to calling the punishment I'd given the Helikean cataphracts after capturing them back in Iserre: broken fingers and being stripped of equipment.

"This is a wild land," Aquiline said. "It would be kinder to simply kill those warriors than to maim and release them. The sword will hurt less than claws."

"It would be a death sentence to release them like that," Vivienne agreed. "Ideally we would ransom them instead, but they've managed to burn every bridge they have. There's no one left who'd pay for them."

"Amadeus might," I objected.

"He can't afford the price," she frankly replied.

"We should seek to recruit soldiers instead," General Jeremiah said. "It would make up for our losses, and the Army of Callow has expertise in assimilating legions."

I rather admired the entirely unashamed way he said.

"That was my thought was well," I admitted, "and Juniper's too. How did that go?"

The Hellhound sighed.

"Malicia poisoned the well," she said. "Most of the rank and file are convinced we assassinated two of their three generals just before making common cause with Sepulchral after a coup failed. Maybe three hundred volunteers, and I wouldn't trust them right off."

Fucking Malicia. I might have given the order to kill Mok, sure, but I wouldn't have been sloppy enough not get blamed for it afterwards.

"They might not be willing to fight for us," Vivienne said, "but they might be willing to fight *against* the Black Knight."

She paused, choosing her words.

"We could offer some of the soldiers freedom in exchange for serving as the first wave of an attack against the camp in the hills."

I chewed on that for a moment. Juniper looked on the fence, but the idea appealed to me. Sure it'd be putting troops we didn't trust all that much in our order of battle, but it'd also soak up casualties that would otherwise thin my own ranks. And, even better, I wouldn't be expected to keep feeding those soldiers after they went their own way.

"We'd have to limit the numbers," I said. "Else we're just releasing an army into the wilds."

"Organization will be tricky," Juniper said. "I'll want to position them so if they turn against us it won't lead to disaster."

That wasn't a no, and after a round of debate the idea was adopted. Aisha left the tent to begin organizing it. That didn't entirely solve our prisoner problem, though, since two thousand at most was what I was comfortable arming again. The arguments went in a circle. No one thought we should feed the prisoners or keep them with us, but most of the measures that'd make them no longer a problem for the rest of this campaign also effectively consigned to death by Wasteland. Everyone agreed, at least, that we should keep the high-ranking officers as prisoners. Execution was floated as an option – by Talbot – but even those that didn't balk at killing prisoners thought it might lead to mass unrest among the imprisoned soldiers.

"Even arming half of them would be a mistake," General Zola argued. "With that many soldiers, which we agreed would be needed to survive the Wasteland, they have enough men to begin seizing the private armories of nobles and towns. They would rearm and pursue us."

"We don't know for certain that they would," Juniper grunted. "But I take your point. I don't want to leave that force at our back either."

And that was the crux of the issue, really. We all wanted to march on Ater, where the war on Praes would be brought to an end, but we needed to clean up house first. That would mean dealing with the Sepulchral situation, later today, but also tying up all our other loose ends. Marshal Nim's army needed to be decisively broken or made to surrender, and after that was done I didn't want Sacker's army nipping at our heels when we moved south. Hells, to be frank I didn't want them involved in that siege at all. They'd not proved to be trustworthy enough to be allowed to, and they'd failed to be victorious enough to force the issue their way. I could just see them stumbling into us at the last moment and fuc- wait, no.

"We're looking at this wrong," I said. "Juniper, how long do you expect operations in Ater to last?"

"Two months at most," she said.

Longer than that and we'd be forced to make a deal anyway. Procer was already buckling, if we wanted there to still be a west by the time we returned we couldn't tarry.

"So we strand them," I said. "We keep the officers and arm enough they should be able to survive the Wasteland, but we take all their mages. If they don't have any access to the Ways..."

"Even at their fastest possible pace, they'll arrive along after the dust is settled in Ater," Juniper finished, tone considering.

"Best we end things with the Black Knight before that," General Jeremiah pragmatically advised. "Still, seems a sound enough plan."

Not the most elegant way to deal with prisoners, but we didn't have time for elegance. A round of agreements, some more enthusiastic than others, saw the matter settled.

"We'll be receiving Sepulchral this afternoon," I said, "to confirm the terms of our cooperation. Once she agrees to lend her aid to an assault on the Loyalist Legions, I believe we should begin preparing for an attack."

"Agreed," Juniper growled. "We have the numbers to properly squeeze her now. I want to swing part of our force out east around Kala Hills and encircle her. The same paths they used to ambush us there can be turned against them now."

The discussion grew animated after that, commanders pitching in for a plan to either force a surrender out of Nim or crush her army irreparably, but I excused myself eventually and Vivienne did the same. We needed to get moving if we were to be ready to receive Sepulchral.

—

Abreha Mirembe wasn't exactly my creature.

You could barely tell even she was dead, since it was poison that'd done her in and she'd been pretty ghoulish even before biting it. I'd raised the would-be empress as undead through use of the Night, but that didn't exactly give me control over her. I could move her limbs, sure, and inflict pain on her soul. But I couldn't control her mind, save through coercion. She'd showed me deference since her raising, but that wasn't the effect of the Night so much as the knowledge that I could send her back to the grave with a snap of my fingers. I was uncomfortably aware that the ties binding me to her were not meaningfully all that different from those binding Malicia to Sargon Sahelian.

I'd soulboxed a High Seat too, it just happened that said box was their own corpse.

We kept the audience private, as small as it could be. That meant two people on our side, Vivienne and myself, and three on hers. High Lady Abreha herself, her designated heir Isobe and the niece

that'd tried to usurp his place, Sanaa. Considering the only reason Sanaa was still alive was that she had enough supporters among Aksum's army and vassals that her death would have caused armed reprisals, I expected relations between her and her aunt to be frosty. To my surprise, Sepulchral now seemed to be favouring her over Isobe and taking no pains to hide it. *Praesi*. Abreha must have decided that a closely-fought coup was a sign of talent and begun to reconsider succession. Isobe was displeased by that undercurrent, by these talks and most of all by me.

"Rumour in the camp is that he blames you for this," Vivienne murmured into my ear.

I blinked at her.

"Why?"

"He lost a lot of face in front of vassal lords and household troops when you and Lord Tanja humiliated him," the Princess said. "He's been saying that if not for that more would have stuck with him instead of turning to Sanaa's camp."

That might be partially true, I thought, though ironically enough Razin had probably done more damage than I did. It was a little much to blame me for his own failure to gather a solid core of supporters, though, especially when he'd been the one starting with a – oh Gods, I'd been spending too much time with *Praesi* if the decisions of someone like Abreha Mirembé were beginning to make sense to me. Best get this over with. After half-hearted courtesies we got to the meat of the talks, which was defining what Sepulchral's position would be going forward.

"I want you to formally renounce your claim on the Tower," I said.

"That cause is lost," Abreha conceded. "Yet renouncing it will have costs for my supporters. I'll not lay down arms only to have a puppet ruler installed in Aksum."

"We can understand that concern," Vivienne diplomatically said. "I assure you, neither Callow nor the Grand Alliance intends to intervene in your matters of succession."

The old woman laughed.

"A nothing promise," she said. "You will have to do better than that. You want my army for your siege of Ater, and I want sturdier assurances in return."

"We could always offer our services to Malicia instead, should you-"

Sepulchral's hand slapped Sanaa across the face. I hadn't even made her do that, so I cocked an eyebrow.

"Count this a favour, girl," Abreha said. "There are some people you don't threaten unless you've made the decision to go through with it. They'll just kill you if you do."

Sanaa liked furious and humiliated, but to her honour she appeared to be listening. Huh. Maybe I *wouldn't* be having a little conversation with Scribe about her, after all. I had no intention of leaving the High Seat closest to the border of Callow in hostile hands, but if she could learn that made drastic steps unnecessary. Vivienne cleared her throat.

"Assurances of what nature?" she asked.

"I want it confirmed by whoever climbs the Tower that I'll legally keep my title until the end of the war against Keter," High Lady Abreha said, "with all attached rights, including that to designate my own successor."

I traded a look with Vivienne, who nodded.

"That could be arranged," I said. "I take it it's a formal Grand Alliance demand you're looking for."

The old woman grinned.

"I want it written in the treaty that settles this dance," she confirmed.

She really was an old fox, I thought. That way no matter how ended up ruling the Dread Empire they couldn't actually try to oust her afterwards without bringing down the Grand Alliance on their head. She was using a continent-spanning coalition as the guarantor of her succession. If nothing else, I had to be impressed by the sheer gall.

"I can't formally agree to that without speaking with Cordelia Hasenbach, though I expect agreement on her part," I said. "That said, I have half the Majilis of Levant in my camp at the moment and they'll back those terms so I'm comfortable giving you a provisional approval."

They were amenable to helping us against Marshal Nim with just that, so it was brisk business afterwards. They departed some hours after and I caught Abreha as she left, away from the others so we could have a quiet conversation.

"So what is it you're actually after?" I asked.

She looked surprised, like she had no idea what I might possibly be implying. It was just a little too smooth to be believable. I cocked an eyebrow and she smiled.

"Who knows how long your war will last?" she said. "It might be a different empire, by the time the dust settles."

"All about staying in the game, huh," I said.

Abreha Mirembé cackled.

"It's the very thing, Black Queen," Sepulchral said. "Perhaps even the *only* thing."

—

We spent three days recovering and planning our offensive against the Black Knight, whose army had further fortified its position in Kala Hills but not since moved. There was some trouble with the prisoners, people trying to flee in the night, but we'd disarmed them and the Wasteland was not kind. Those that got out did not get far, and bringing back the mangled corpses to display them soured the appetite for that kind of adventure. Our count of recruits rose to around four hundred but came to a hard stop after that, with further efforts yielding nothing. Aisha's efforts to make 'volunteer companies' that would fight against Nim were more successful, though, reaching close to the two thousand that I'd been willing to allow.

The rebels might despise us but they were scarcely fonder of the Black Knight, who had spurned their offer of joining forces in favour of remaining loyal to the Tower, and many found freedom in arms in the wake of fighting 'Malicia's dogs' a rough but fair deal. Juniper and the general staff were putting the finishing touches on our plan to break the Legions with as few losses as possible to us, aiming to push the deaths on Sepulchral and the volunteers as much as we could without being too obvious about it, but I flitted in and out of those meetings. Most of my time was spent with Scribe and Vivienne, scrambling to get a read on the situation in the rest of Praes.

We still couldn't scry properly, but that was a regional effect. Sending mages further out and then arranging messages being carried by horse worked, well enough that Cordelia was able to send her assent to High Lady Abreha's terms and secure her alliance to us. I enjoyed the relative light demands made by this on my time, but the relative sense of safety was ripped out of my grasp without warning on the morning of the fourth day after the Battle of Kala. Even if Masego hadn't immediately come for me I would have known something was up: the amount of power I could feel coming out of the Black Knight's camp was like a lit beacon to my senses.

"War ritual?" I bluntly asked.

"No," Hierophant immediately replied. "And it is two rituals. One of them, the smaller, is making a gate into the Ways."

I blinked.

"You told me the Ways wouldn't be usable for a few days still," I slowly said. "That they were still too fragile for large troop movements."

"They are," Masego said. "Which is why I believe the other ritual is meant to stabilize them in some way, or at least accelerate the process of that recovery."

"That can be done?"

"I cannot," Hierophant reluctantly admitted. "At least, I have not yet grasped how it might be done. It is possible that either Akua or other talented mages have found such a solution, however."

"So they're trying to slip away into the Ways," I pressed.

"That seems likely," he agreed.

Fuck. And that would mean facing this same army again, only holed up behind the walls of Ater. I could think of few things I wanted less. Juniper was of the same opinion and we hastily mobilized. Hierophant probed with spells and figured out the stabilizing ritual would need to finish before they could begin moving out, so we had a few hours to spare at least. Enough that we arranged for the volunteer companies to be armed and put in front while Sepulchral's army deployed on the plains below the enemy camp. It all took long enough that Masego confirmed the stabilizing ritual was done by the time we began to march in battle formations, which meant I was now fighting the Battle of Maillac's Boot again only from the other side.

We couldn't even muster our whole army for the attack, since at least three thousand had needed to stay behind to keep an eye on the prisoners, so this was going to get *messy*. Taking a fortified uphill Legion camp with only hasty preparations? We sent the rebels and the volunteer companies as the first wave. To my distaste, I saw that Abreha had sent in her levies first. I could understand the sense in that, professional soldiers didn't grow on trees, but it would be a slaughter. Still, horns and trumpets sounded. There would be blood. Soldiers marched up the hill, and atop it a thin crest of legionaries formed a shield wall of their own. Steel glittered under the sun, a sea of it.

It was an accident when it happened. They began singing, on one side and the other, with just a few beats of difference.

*"Boot goes up and boot goes down –*

*There goes their callow crown."*



The Legionary's Song, most people knew it as. Some called it *Swallow the World* instead, but they were fewer. The legionaries which had been named rebels began to sing it, moments before the legionaries that had been deemed loyal did the same. There was a beat of hesitation, steps slowing, and the songs melded.

*"And no matter how high the walls*

*We're all gonna make them fall."*

The couplet ended to the sight of the legionaries that'd been climbing the hill stopping. No arrows followed, no devastating barrage of spells or munitions.

*"They can send us their pretty Knight,*

*Their killer all decked in white,*

*Only now we've got one too –*

*And he always gets his due*

.

*They got a wizard in the West*

*But no matter how he's blessed*

*We got a Warlock in the Tower*

*Who'll use his bones for flour*

.

*Let them keep their priestly king*

*Cause no matter how sweet he sings*

*We've got an Empress black as sin*

*Who'll take his throne with a grin."*

It was a happy song, or at least meant to be. And yet somehow the tune that the wind carried all the way to me was mournful. A lament.

*"We're the Legion and the Terror*

*They're in the right but we're meaner*

*So pray hard boy, and pay your toll –*

*We're gonna swallow the world whole."*

Atop the hill, legionaries looked at legionaries down it. And someone, some faceless man or woman, threw their shield on the ground. Their sword. And something hung in the air, a weight, as armies that had been savaging each other for weeks looked at each other. Someone in the volunteer companies threw down their own shield, and then it was like floodgates had opened. Shields and swords and helmets fell to the ground. And then, in the most damning of silences, the soldiers left. Nim's, the rebels, even some of mine – the Thirteenth most of all, but had I not devoured legions before? The Army of Callow spat back out some of those sons and daughters.

Even some of the levies bolted, melting into the river of deserters.

"-Majesty, Your Majesty," Brandon Talbot called.

I glanced at him.

"What should we do?"

I looked atop the hill. How many of her men had Nim lost? I couldn't tell, but it was not few. Same for us, and somehow I knew that when I returned to camp prisoners would have joined the flood as well. We'd all brought armies here, waved banners and played games. Won and lost. And after two weeks of brutality, an army was walking away. Could I really blame them? What were any of the people here fighting *for*? Even those of us with causes had dragged them through so much dust they could hardly be recognized.

"Nothing," I finally said. "Nothing. Let them go."

Even the Black Knight what few had left to flee with. We would meet again in Ater, to end it all.

A song and then silence: so ended the Battle of Kala.

## **Interlude: South**

*"Coincidence is just fate bereft of faith."*

– Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

Kallia liked to think of Mercantis as what would happen if a city ate other cities until it grew fat.

It helped her fix the story of this place in her mind and that was the most important thing for someone who wanted to prowl its nights. Which she often did. Though the Painted Knife was the leader of the band of five that had been sent to the City of Bought and Sold, she preferred to leave handling the merchant lords to Rhodon. The Royal Conjuror had been a powerful man in

the court of Helike for many years, before fleeing the Tyrant's ascension, and he knew how to deal with the fat schemers that infested this city like maggots would a corpse. And where he struggled, well, there were few in Mercantis whose buried skeletons could not be found out when Alain and Angelique both took to looking for them.

The Relentless Magistrate had toppled three merchant lords, two of which had been members of the Forty-Sole Court, since arriving in the city. He'd done this by proving materially and in excruciating detail how they were breaking the laws in the Consortium, causing a feeding frenzy among rivals. Angelique's own work never saw the light of day, the very lucrative – and technically legal – trade of poisons and favours she'd begun at the highest levels of influence granting her access to halls of power where no foreigners would ever be allowed to stand otherwise. Rhodon had not been shy in using them to get obstacles out of the way when it came to the task the Grand Alliance had assigned their band: burning Praesi influence out of the city.

And yet, for all the work of those three, in the end it was Teresa and Kallia who found the first hint of the plot. They'd gone drinking outside the city on one of the outlying shores, the Grizzled Fantassin calling an old acquaintance who'd 'put on the yoke' and become one of the mercenaries permanently contracted to protect Mercantis instead of a proper army. Teresa drank and brawled with the man through the evening, but when their glances took on another tone Kallia made herself scarce. She'd gone out to look for another place to drink – and perhaps a man of her own to throw backs with – but instead what the Painted Knife found was an assassination.

Two corpses later a grateful mercenary captain told her everything he knew, which in truth wasn't much. Many officers had recently been offered large sums of money to accept retirement. The captain had refused, preferring the soldier's life, and now wondered if some of the other mercenaries he'd thought uninterested in retiring were corpses instead of truly gone to Dormer. Come morning, Kallia brought the oddity up to Teresa and watched the old woman's face harden.

"Someone's tightening their reins on the mercenary companies," the Grizzled Fantassin said. "Placing their own officers in key positions."

The Painted Knife grinned.

"A plot," she enthused. "We must defeat it."

Finally, something she could do instead of exploring the city and struggling with the impulse to cut everyone in this place who owned 'indentured servants'. Even Wastelanders despised slavery,

for all their many other sins. They brought their findings to Rhodon, who punctured their ardour.

"It is Merchant Prince Mauricius consolidating his position," the Royal Conjuror said. "This is not likely to be a large enough scandal to topple him should it come out, and even if it were such an outcome is not desirable. His most likely replacement is more inclined to the Empire than the Grand Alliance."

The Consortium usually kept its Praesi clients at a distance, Rhodon explained, but the sheer amount of coin the Dread Empire poured into the city meant it tended to have friends in high places. The perceived high-handedness of the Grand Alliance and plans of a great city at the heart of the continent had only encouraged that trend.

"Seems odd he'd bother," Angelique told them over dinner, after being informed. "The Merchant Prince already controls funding for mercenaries unless contradicted by two thirds of the Forty-Stole Court. What are these men going to listen to, if not the money?"

"Yet he is not a man with a reputation for pointless action," Kallia frowned.

"No," Rhodon murmured. "So what is it that has the man afraid of being contradicted by two thirds of the Forty-Stole Court?"

And so once more they went on the hunt, for anything that would turn so many of the most powerful men and women in the city against Mauricius was bound to be important. Teresa returned to the outer shores to try to get a grasp on how many of the mercenary companies were being subverted and meanwhile Kallia set her finest bloodhound on the hunt.

"The Merchant Prince's affairs are all protected by law," Alain Monduc said. "Even his most mundane papers are considered as being 'of state'. There is no way for foreigners to access them, which will limit us to witnesses."

Kallia did not know the average lifespan of a witness in Mercantis that a wealthy man wanted dead, but at a guess she'd venture days. Meaning that if Alain's investigations were caught on to, their sole evidence was going to be swiftly disappeared.

"Ah but that's where you have it wrong, darling," the Poisoner girlishly smiled. "There is simply no *lawful* way for foreigners to access such papers."

The Magistrate looked like he was choking on sheer outrage, to the Poisoner's open delight, but when copies of such papers appeared on his table just before noon he mastered his anger.

"Copies are not strictly illegal," Alain stiffly said. "And there is some leeway in the process of gathering evidence for a trial."

Angelique looked rather robbed by the lack of explosion, which was probably half the reason the Magistrate had forced himself to be cordial. Weeks of following paper trails and Kallia being sent out to follow men and eavesdrop on their conversations at night ultimately led the Relentless Magistrate to an odd conclusion.

"Mauricius is not preparing a coup," Alain announced, "but preparing *against* one. Every single measure we've unearthed was defensive in nature."

Which made little sense, for the First Prince had strictly warned against trying to remove Mauricius from his position and the Black Queen had shrugged her assent. Even if Kallia did get her hands on something that could topple the Merchant Prince, she was to pass that information to the Grand Alliance instead so that it might be used as leverage in negotiations. So who was the Merchant Prince afraid would remove him?

"It could be the Tower," Angelique said. "Rumour has it that he had murdered the man Malicia wanted as Merchant Prince instead."

"The Empress has a reputation has a practical woman," Rhodon replied. "It would be unlike her to force an enemy where she could court an ally instead. Besides, meddling too deeply in the affairs of Mercantis would see it react harshly. It would look for protection against her, not fall in line."

"Let us pray the Empress fumbled the pig, then," Teresa said. "It would be a gift of the Gods for Mercantis to go the way of the Grand Alliance. We could use the gold."

Kallia looked questioningly at Alain, but the other Proceran seemed just as baffled by the expression. *Arlesite*, the man mouthed with a shrug.

"But whatever it is he's afraid of, he's nearly covered," Teresa continued. "He's got a little over half the mercenary companies in his pocket now. The key officers at least."

"If it were a Praesi plot, he would not have spent a fortune of his coin warding against it," Alain opined. "He would have passed the matter to us. He's certainly not been shy about using us as bears in his pit so far."

True enough. The verbal duels of the Royal Conjuror and the Praesi ambassador had turned into a form of local entertainment and they'd all been tacitly allowed to go after Praesi spies in the city so long as there was little collateral damage.

"There's not many people left who could pull off a coup," the Poisoner noted. "The Black Queen is in Praes, the Free Cities in another civil war and even the merchants would balk at taking the Dead King's coin."

"If there is no outside backing, it has to be an internal enemy," Rhodon mused.

"Which makes no sense," Angelique said. "Only the Forty-Stole Court could depose him and it's more divided than it was before he was elected. He's been playing the faction that wants a rapprochement with the Grand Alliance against the Praesi stooges to carve out a faction in the middle. No one has the votes to depose him, so what is it that he's afraid of?"

Kallia sighed. She'd never enjoyed plots and schemes. It had almost gotten her killed in Levante when she'd failed to figure out whose body the Spirit of Vengeance wore during the day, if the- suddenly she paused.

"What if the vote were rigged?" the Painted Knife asked. "You said that the Empress might want to be rid of him, Angelique, and Rhodon you once told us that his most likely replacement is in the Empire's pocket."

The Royal Conjurer hummed.

"Mind control?" he said.

"I was thinking of possession," Kallia admitted. "I have known spirits that could ride men unseen and nudge their thoughts."

"It would explain why he might expect to be able to use the mercenaries against the Forty Stoles and not be murdered for it afterwards," the Poisoner mused. "If he freed them and then made a show of returning control, it might instead strengthen his position."

"The entire city would sing his praises," Alain agreed. "A man can do much, with the love of the people behind him and debts of gratitude among the great."

"The best contracts are those you snipe another company to," the Grizzled Fantassin grinned. "Let's see if we can't get all that gratitude headed our way instead, yes?"

The plan was weeks in the making. Angelique had to burn through most of her favours and it still wasn't enough: they had to knock out guards so they could enter the Court unseen. Alain guided them through the halls, as the only one of them who'd ever been in here before – when he had presented evidence in trials – and Teresa paid off the mercenaries that'd agreed to help them smuggle in the barrels over the last few days. It still almost

when to the Hells when an early guard patrol ran into them, but the Painted Knife got in close and dropped them before they could raise alarm. They rolled the four great wooden barrels with them into the great hall after Alain kicked the door open, to the great anger of the merchant lords in assembly.

The Royal Conjurer obeyed Kallia's shouted order and gathered his magic, striking down with great gouts of flame and blowing up the barrels. Mist swept over the hall, still holy and in heavy enough a cloud that it would disrupt either spells or possession.

And then, to Kallia's horror, nothing at all happened.

The shouts from the furious merchant lords got louder and the Painted Knife wondered if she had just ruined the relations between the Grand Alliance and Mercantis when one bloodcurdling scream pierced through the din. Merchant Prince Mauricius dropped out of his seat, screaming in a way that no throat could, and when he rose flakes of his face began to crumple. Underneath was a pitch-black skin, but there was nothing human about it.

"Devil," someone shouted.

Kallia cocked her head to the side. Huh. They'd been wrong but it had worked anyhow, so... win?

*Win*, she decided, and grinned.

—

Penthes' tall walls had kept the city in the war long past the time where a man less desperate than Exarch Prodocius would have surrendered.

Penthes has lost all its territories save a few holdout river fortresses, stood without allies and the city was beginning to starve. The supplies and mage support the Tower had sent were not enough for a city-state of that size to stay fed when encircled. Now that Basilia's army was equipped with proper dwarven siege engines, the walls were no longer a surmountable hindrance either. In truth, if not for the presence of the Bellerophon army beneath the walls Basilia would have already ordered the city to be stormed. She'd had a swath of the southern walls reduced to rubble by trebuchet bombardment, but she was wary of committing her army to investing the city if there was a chance the Republic would strike at her while she did.

Helike still had the finest army in the Free Cities, but its numbers had thinned. Basilia had long been aware that one severe defeat was all that stood between her and the Helikean army ending as a fighting force for a few years. It was why she'd been so aggressive in her campaigning: so long as she was on the offence, she could force the battles on terms favourable to her.

Now that streak of victories had been dragged to a halt, first by the presence of Bellerophon at the siege and then by what had followed Basilia's army entrenching for a few months: *diplomacy*. The Secretariat had been the first to send envoys, but Mercantis had not been far behind and eventually even Atalante – at the urging of First Prince Cordelia, her agents said – had sent representatives.

Nicae and Stygia already had envoys, arguably, as Magister Zoe Ixioni and Princess Zenobia Vasilakis were personally leading the troops their vassal states were contributing to the war. Not that the vassalage was official, or for that matter Zoe Ixioni's rule. Officially speaking she was still only a magister, though one who'd been voted emergency powers by the Magisterium without an end to those powers every being specified. Basilia tended to think better of Zenobia, who at least had no pretend she was anything but an absolute ruler when she'd crowned herself princess of Nicae. Regardless of the petty details, the fact was that six cities of the League all had envoys or armies here beneath the walls of seventh and last.

General Basilia found it highly amusing that while the city of Penthes and its ruling exarch had been made political nonentities, the siege of Penthes itself had turned into a diplomatic hotbed for the entire League of Free Cities. It was the sort of irony Kairos Theodosian would have delighted in, she suspected, and might even have gone out of his way to arrange. She had not, but Basilia was no Tyrant. That was not her calling, nor did she feel as if it should be. *Ye of Helike, do as you will*. The testament of the last Theodosian had not invited his people to follow in his wake: they were to do as they wished and nothing else, that was the very point.

Basilia had found her own wishes leading her to the walls of Penthes, to the threshold of what might very well be the defining hour of the League of Free Cities.

It was not delusion on her part to believe that. Zenobia and Ixioni agreed: there was an urgency in the air, a desperation. At first the Atalante priest-philosophers that'd been sent as delegates had only visited to sneer and snipe at the proceedings, but now they came by every other day and were negotiation in earnest. They couldn't afford not to, when Delos had sent one of the highest-ranking members of the Secretariat – Nestor Ikaroi – as its representative and begun to seriously back a reform of the League of Free Cities. The preachers were terrified of being left out in the cold, surrounded on all sides by states bound in alliance. Still, for all that the talks were moving it would have been a lie to say they were *succeeding*.

"Ikaroi isn't moving an inch even when we give ground elsewhere," Magister Zoe noted as the day's talks ended. "He's usually a



reasonable man, so I expect he's under orders by the broader Secretariat."

Basilias made a noise that conveyed both agreement and disgruntlement.

"His current concessions are not insignificant," Princess Zenobia said. "Formal recognition of the imperial realm of Aenia and you as its empress is not something I thought we'd get out of the Secretariat without putting a sword to their throat. The scribes hate change the way a cat hates water."

"They would have been forced to bend on that sooner or later," Basilias said. "I hold the land, even if they might wish it otherwise. Getting me named protector of the League is where the power lies."

In practice it was not Basilias herself who was named but the imperial office of Aenia, which she happened to hold. It had been her notion to name the empire that would unite Nicaea, Stygia and Helike together after the great Aenos Basileon, the sole claim to unifying authority in the region that predated the foundation of the League. It was the general's intention to follow in footsteps of Basileon and unite the Free Cities once more, but she knew she must be careful lest she follow in the footsteps of Dread Empress Triumphant instead. Even if she could take all of the League by force, she could not hope to hold them. No, better to first unite the western cities – Helike for soldiery, Nicaea for trade and Stygia for fields and mines – and let her successors finish the work.

For that, though she needed an edge that would prevent the four other cities from turning on her empire in a decade after the dangers had passed. Something that would set Helike apart from the rest. To secure that she'd proposed to the other cities of the League the creation of an office under its auspices: protector of the League of Free Cities. She'd been careful not to outright step on the powers of the Hierarch, instead suggesting the protector would lead the armies of the League in time of war and see to the defence of its borders against all foreign powers. Tying that authority to rule of Aenia had been the scheme, as it would ensure that Basilias's line would have hereditary power over the League of Free Cities.

Delos was balking at that, Ikaroi's suggested compromise of Basilias herself holding such power for her lifetime and then it being subject to election like the office of Hierarch being the most they were willing to offer. Atalante wasn't as entrenched in its opposition but was demanding instead that anyone holding such an office must follow the House of Light, which was... controversial. Trying to throw slices of Penthesian territory at the Secretariat had yielded no further concessions, even when Basilias had gotten serious and offered strategically important

border fortresses. Mercantis seemed to be playing all sides, Merchant Prince Mauricius' envoys propping up Delos and Atalante publicly while making her assurances of support in private. So long as the privileged position of the City of Bought and Sold was maintained they would not go against her, they swore.

Considering Mercantis had served as middlemen when she'd needed siege engines from the dwarves, Basilia could not simply toss the snakes out of her tent the way she wanted to. She might need the Consortium again before it was all over.

"Delos has a particular distaste for hereditary power," Magister Zoe said. "I am not surprised they're proving to be the most troublesome holdout. Atalante was ruled by queens, once, but the Secretariat had held the power for millennia."

In some form, anyway, as the scribes insisted their current government was descended from the provincial one Aenos Basileon had placed to rule over the city, thus making them the sole true descendent of that founding empire. Every city save Helike and Bellerophon claimed some kind of relation to the old empire, actually. The Trakas of Nicae claimed descent of the man himself, Stygia that the Magisterium was a regency council until restoration of the empire, Penthes that their first exarch was Basileon's chosen successor and Atalante that the man himself had been buried under their city – and so they were the custodians of his empire, until the Gods Above raised him from the dead.

Not that the old stories had ever mattered much, save when Bellerophon tried to get the empire formally dissolved by the League every few years and those same cities balked.

"At least the Glorious Republic is staying out of our way," Princess Zenobia drily said. "I suppose that is the best to be expected out of them, lack of direct harm."

Everyone's positions were calcifying, Basilia felt. She knew the feeling, knew how it could be the death of progress. She'd seen it at work in Helike, in the years before the Tyrant had restored the city: factions biting at each other around an indolent throne, no one winning or losing anything of worth. No one was going to move much from their current negotiating positions and that might be the death of this entire enterprise. Bellerophon's absence was an integral part of the stalemate, Basilia finally decided. The Republic was made up of mobs and madmen, but they were part of the League – and without them coming out on either side, Delos and Atalante felt they still had some breathing room.

If nothing else, some form of accord with the Republic would allow her to at finish off Penthes for good and turn up the pressure.

"We're done for the day," the general said, rising to her feet.

"Indeed?" Magister Zoe said, cocking an eyebrow.

"I must talk to some people," Basilia said, meaning People.

Getting to the Bellerophan camp wasn't difficult, or even being noticed when she approached: as usual they had at least twice the number of sentries they needed. Getting one of those soldiers to acknowledge that presence was more difficult, even with a company of kataphraktoi at her back. She pounded at the gate until they were forced to admit she was there, and then a harried-looking general was rustled up to speak with her. Two blank-faced kanenas stood behind him, which no doubt did little for the man's confidence about getting through this conversation alive.

"I seek to address the People," General Basilia bluntly said.

"As a foreign despot-"

"I am a general in service to no crown," Basilia corrected.

The man looked taken aback, looking back to the kanenas. Their faces were still as a pond and just as unreadable.

"There are no diplomats with the army," the general said. "You must head to Bellerophon and make your request there."

"That would be inconvenient," Basilia said. "Might I not simply, under observation by the kanenas, make my address and let Bellerophans convey it to the people by scrying ritual?"

"Bellerophon does not use scrying rituals," the man replied without missing a beat, "which are trick of wicked foreign tyrants and have never worked, may a wind of locusts blow in their faces for a hundred years."

Basilia blinked. Bellerophon absolutely did use such rituals.

"Do you perhaps have an alternative with superficial resemblances?" she hazarded.

"Communication rituals are a recent innovation of the Republic," the general shamelessly said. "They can serve similar purposes on occasion. It is not, however, in power to accede to your request."

The kanenas frowned and the man winced.

"As I have no power," he hastily added, "for it rests entirely in the hands of the People, may they rule peerlessly and without mistake for another thousand years."

Basilia waited to see if the general was going to start bleeding from his eyes. Ten heartbeats passed and he didn't, which was a promising sign.

"How may such a request be accepted or denied?" she pressed.

They had no answer to give her, so negotiations ended for half an hour while they went away to figure it out. Another woman entirely returned to answer, with two different kanenas at her back. Basilia decided not to ask what had happened to the general. From what she remembered of Anaxares' mournful ramblings, that would be a good way to get the man killed.

"Your request can be accepted or denied by a provisional vote of the entire camp," the woman said.

"May I ask for such a vote?"

An hour later she was informed that she could. It took another two hours after she *did* ask, and then they conceded that a provisional vote would be held. It was dark by then but while Basilia sent for food and took a pause to piss, she did not wander far. If she did, she was sure to lose these people. It took until Morning Bell until the votes were counted, but the kanenas found an irregularity with some of the ballots – some had been written in ink that came from Delos – so another vote had to be held. Three hours later, Basilia was woken up from her nap on her horse to be informed that the vote had gone in her favour. Though bone-tired and aching from the restless night, she took the only shot she was likely to have.

No doubt by next week the People would have cooked up a new law that made even her unlikely station unfit to ask questions of the Glorious Republic.

She left after passing along her message – offer, really – and crawled back into bed until noon. Delos and Atalante came later the same day to try to dig out of her what she'd been up to, but she put them off. It wouldn't last forever, but thankfully the Republic had been quick in arranging for a general vote on her proposition. As soon as they'd held a vote about whether to hold a vote, anyway, which pushed the answer back another day. With typical subtlety, the envoys from Bellerophon walked into her tent as she was seated with those from Delos and Atalante.

"The Republic welcomes your recognition that Hierarch Anaxares is still among the living," the man said.

There was surprise from the others, but why wouldn't she? If there was to be a seat above her own in the League, best to leave it in the hands of a man either dead or uninterested in filling it. Permanently, if she could.

"Furthermore, your question over the status of the Dead King has been put to debate and the People have reached conclusion," the man continued. "By popular vote, Trismegistus of Keter is

declared an Egregious Millennial Despot and an Enemy of the People. The so-called Kingdom of the Dead is declared unlawful."

She bit down on a grin. Ah, and there was the trick. Basilia couldn't declare war on anyone, because when a Hierarch ruled foreign affairs of the League were strictly under their purview. As Anaxares himself had once said during the invasion of Procer, however, there could be no state of war against a state that was not legitimate. If, say, Basilia led troops of the League to 'oversee the dissolution of Keter' then by the Bellerophan definition of the term it would not be a war. By the look of the frown on Ikaroi's face, he'd already put together as much.

"And the proposition over the office of Protector of the League?"

"Under the current terms of election, the People support the creation of such an office," the man said.

Such terms being every city having a vote, same as the election of a Hierarch, but instead of unanimity only majority would be required here. Helike would vote for itself and its vassal cities, whose votes would be maintained as independent ones, would vote accordingly. To secure a permanent majority, all that Basilia now needed to do was take Penthes and dictate in their terms of surrender a permanent vote for the reigning monarch of Aenia for this office. And she'd be able to take Penthes now, because as of tomorrow she was going to request the help of the People in overseeing the dissolution of Keter. The same army currently in her way would serve as the vanguard of this worthy enterprise.

"I gratefully receive the People's wisdom," General Basilia smiled.

Already she could see Nestor Ikaroi and the Atalante priests reconsidering their position. But it would not, she suddenly realized, be enough. The shock of this turnabout hadn't quite pushed them over the top. The mire would continue. When messengers entered the tent she was grateful, as the pause would allow her to gather her thoughts and think of a way through, but the way the faces of the foreign envoys paled caught her attention. Magister Zoe leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

"My people say that Merchant Prince Mauricius had been revealed to have been replaced by a devil," she said. "The city is blaming Praes for it."

Basilia let out a low whistle.

"Why are they so unsettled?" she asked, discreetly gesturing at the envoys.

Zoe Ixion grinned sharply.

"Because the Forty-Stole Court has voted unanimously to ask for an alliance with the Empress of Aenia," she said. "They want protection."

And so the calculations in the eyes of the envoys changed again. The mire in their negotiations now looked like the Tower's work, to keep the south from solidifying in a single block. Worse than that, they knew that if Basilia began getting funding from Mercantis she might lose patience with them playing for time and decided that this could be settled with armies instead. And with that much coin behind her she'd be able to win that damned war, too.

"Perhaps reconsidering our position on the office of Protector is needed, considering the developments in the League and abroad," Secretary Nestor Ikaroi calmly said.

There were some noises of assent from the Atalante crowd and General Basilia Katopodis smiled. She knew better than to think this her triumph entirely, but it was sweet nonetheless. Sweeter still was the knowledge that the Gods were blowing wind in her sail, for what else but Fate could this assembly of coincidence be? The Old World was ending, she could feel it in her bones. The age was crumbling to dust, its relics falling one after another, and now something else was beginning to emerge from the ruins. And under that new sun, Basilia thought, there would be room for a new way of doing things. The deaths throes of the Age of Wonders would change the League of Free Cities, she swore it.

The word shivered in approval and somehow she knew that, somewhere down Below, Kairos Theodosian was laughing.

## **Interlude: North II**

*"Twenty years will blend friend and foe."*

– Taghreb saying

Hakram Deadhand stood in a shadowed corner of the tent as his allies raucously argued, watching them in silence. The leaders of the dominant clans of the alliance, the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields, were trading the usual insults and boasts with the representatives of their allied clans. Dag Clawtoe and Oghuz the Lamé towered above all others in that conversation, as had been the case from the start. Their clans were the largest and wealthiest, their deeds the greatest – in Oghuz's case, anyway. Juniper's father had been a famous champion for the Red Shields before his leg wound. Dag instead must rely on lesser deeds and the reputation of the cousin that'd overshadowed him all his life.

He was only the *jemmek* of the Howling Wolves, the camp-leader, even though Grem One-Eye had not returned to the Steppes in decades.

Adjutant did wade into the talks. He preferred not to. The moment to speak would come when the tent was empty and it was only he and Catherine, when he could complete her vision with what he'd seen and she hadn't by virtue of not being so close to it all. Detachment had been in Hakram's blood since he was but a boy but he'd made his peace with the feeling. Found the uses in having blood that rarely went red. Calm was what let you see with clarity and tonight, calmly looking at the alliance in this tent, what Adjutant saw was a losing proposition. The conversation was going through familiar, pointless circles.

It would take more than champions and challenges to cut into Troke Snaketooth's support. It was attacking the symptom instead of the sickness: Troke was not popular because he had many champions, he had many champions because he was popular. The chieftain of the Blackspears was growing more powerful by the day, and the longer the conversation went on the more Hakram realized that none of them had any idea of what to do about it. It was not that they were fools, or dim, but that they'd never had to deal with being this position before. The Blackspears had a foul reputation, while the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields had been held in high honour for decades.

They were still popular even now, but the ground was shifting under their feet. Hakram thought that under all the boasts and shouts he might be hearing a thread of disquiet. They could feel it too, the wind turning against them.

There was no point in staying here, Adjutant realized. No solution to be found in this tent, only the same conversation had in one of a hundred different ways. Yet he was not discouraged, for Hakram Deadhand had already figured out where he *would* find his answer. Adjutant was one of the Woe, and so he knew that one could learn from enemies as well as allies. Still silent, he slipped out of the tent and into the muddy grounds of the great camp surrounding the fortress of Chagoro. Not too long ago, Hakram had received an invitation by Sigvin of the Split Tree Clan to begin private talks with the Blackspears in Callow's name.

He still held no intention of accepting that invitation, but it brought something to mind: the Split Tree Clan itself.

As early as the delegations that'd been sent to Wolof he'd thought that alliance strange. The Blackspears had a reputation as feckless liars, while the Split Tree were known instead as cleaving close to old ways. They were known for their shamans, many of which could use magic, and for being willing to serve as mediators in the disputes of others. They were not a large clan,

though, or one known for its warriors. So Hakram had assumed the alliance with the Blackspears to be a marriage of convenience: they were large and powerful but of poor repute and without a speck of magic to call on. The weaknesses of the Blackspears would make the Split Tree influential over them, difficult to dislodge even after Troke Snaketooth took power.

Except something didn't fit in that story. Adjutant hadn't noticed it the last time he'd gone to the edge of the territory claimed by the Split Tree Clan, but now that he knew what to look for it was hard to miss. Troke Snaketooth had been showering his allies and servants in wealth so that the display might attract others to his banner, but there was no trace of that wealth in the Split Tree camp. No herds of sheep put to roast, no great barrels of aragh and batak freed to flow, no baskets full of pottery and ivory and furs. No thick rings of gold and jewelled earrings. The Split Tree Clan was the most important ally to a wealthy chief on the rise, but it was not visibly gaining from that position. So what was it getting paid in, power? That was not enough.

Power might satisfy the chief and his closest circle, but a clan was more than these. They would see their friends and allies growing wealthy while they did not and there would be rumbles of discontent. So what was it that the Split Tree were getting? Hakram's instincts told him that behind that truth lay the key to the alliance around the Blackspears, the key to understanding his foe. Perhaps even the key to turning this around. Unwilling to simply retreat after having come all this way, Hakram wandered off to the closest marketplace and bought a few skewers of horse before returning to lean against the tall post marking the edge of the Split Tree grounds. He'd been seen from the start, so he was not surprised when someone came out to meet him.

Or who it was that'd been sent. Sigvin wore one of those tunics showing a generous eyeful of her scarred shoulders, which a thick braid only drew attention to, but this time Hakram's gaze did not stray. The calm was on him, the itch to understand what made something work. The same part of him that'd made a game about stacking stones to see how people would play it.

"If it's my tent you're looking for, Hakram, you'll have to offer me a drink first," Sigvin said, flashing her fangs flirtatiously. "And maybe tell me about Keter, since tales insist you've been there."

The tall orc did not answer, continuing to look at her clan's camp as he finished the last bits of his meat and tossed the skewers aside.

"Adjutant, then," Sigvin mused, tone changing.

Hakram inclined his head to the side in agreement.



"You would have gone into the camp if you meant to accept Troke's invitation to talk," she continued, humming in interest. "So what is it that does bring you here, Deadhand?"

He had half a dozen lies ready, but what would be the point? What he wanted here was nothing for them to fear. Nothing they would not want to give him.

"I want to understand what the Split Tree gets from this," Adjutant said. "Why this alliance, why now? Why are you so tightly bound to a clan you wouldn't have looked at twice a decade ago?"

Sigvin did not look reluctant or cautious but pleased. He'd thought she might. And why wouldn't she, when for the first time since Hakram had come to Chagoro he was trying to understand her clan instead of stepping over it?

"The answer is in your question, Hakram Deadhand," Sigvin said. "A decade ago. Give or take a few years, that's how long you've been gone isn't it? Since you took to the Legions."

"Give or take a few years," Hakram agreed.

"The first of our kind Named in centuries," Sigvin said. "And you never even came back to the Steppes."

There'd been a lot of that talk when he first came here, especially as an envoy of Callow, but it'd died out after the first few crushing victories in duels. It wasn't his people's way to question strength.

"I wouldn't be Named if I had," Adjutant bluntly replied. "I found my path far from here and it did not lead back until now."

And, for all that it had cost him and might yet, he did not regret it.

"An even more damning answer," Sigvin replied just as bluntly. "You don't see it because you were of the Howling Wolves and then a soldier far away, but we are not so blind: the Legions of Terror are eating the Clans, bit by bit."

Hakram felt like scoffing but restrained himself. It was obvious she believed every word and Adjutant believed Sigvin to be an intelligent woman. She would have a *reason* to believe this.

"The Legions are making the Clans richer," he replied instead, "and without the need to fight each other for that wealth. Our people return home with learning and allies. We have more influence in the affairs of the Tower than we've had in centuries because of the same ties you condemn."

She shook her head.

"It's the wrong sort of wealth, Adjutant," Sigvin said. "It's imperial coin, which we use to trade with them instead of each other. Our people come back using the Praesi system of measurement, building forges the goblin way, organizing warriors in companies instead of warbands. It's hollowed out your own clan without Dag Clawtoe realizing it. The Howling Wolves don't war for cattle and land anymore, they send their youths south and wait for the gold to return with them. Only gold's not all that comes back. They began training their youngbloods in Legion drills a few years back, did you know? To give their youths an edge when they send them south to enrol."

Sigvin paused, strong face twisted in disgust.

"Not if," she said, "but *when*."

There was much he could answer to that. Praesi measurements were superior in almost every regard to those used by learned orcs and them alone – horns and fingers – while goblins were the finest metalworkers on Calernia and warbands were unfit for anything but raiding as a military formation. It would have been easy to dismiss her words as that of someone from the old order, afraid of change even when that change was for the better. Except Sigvin was not a fool. So he looked at the camp of the Split Trees again with fresh eyes. Hide tents, but it was rare for a tent to be made all of the same hides. Different hunting grounds, trade with other clans. And on the people the jewelry was of many styles, be it thick torcs of the eastern steppes, the silver piercings from the headwater clans or the looping earrings of the south.

The Split Tree Clan was traditionalist, Hakram had known that, but he'd not truly considered what that would *mean*.

Their wealth, their gains, were made in the traditional mould of orc clans since the founding of the Empire. To the Split Tree, wealth was something temporary. Won when the clan claimed good riverside land for a season and pottery could be made from clay, when good grazing lands allowed the clan to stay long enough for smithies to be raised and weapons of quality forged. Surplus was traded to other clans to fill needs, and when the clan was in a strong position it went raiding – either other orcs or humans. That stolen wealth was brought back and used to strengthen the clan, sometimes even to absorb smaller neighbours. If things went well for a few years, the clan grew.

Clans too large were unsustainable, so the largest ones would then split into two and head different ways.

It was a rough way of life, but it had worked. The harshness of the Steppes culled the weak but it also ensured that there could never be a kingly clan standing above all others: hunger bit victors just as deep as the vanquished. As a closed circle, the old ways of the Steppes really did work. Only now the circle was

no longer closed. The Legions since the Reforms were not the same as the armies of the old tyrants, which had once a reign drafted orcs by the hundreds of thousands for a campaign and then sent them back to the Steppes after the war. The modern Legions kept orcs for decades, taught them Praesi ways and enriched them before sending them home.

And Hakram Deadhand had seen this same machine at work before.

"The Carrion Lord really is a magnificent bastard," he admitted. "I had little sympathy with the moaning of Callowans when his works were improving so many of their lives, but I understand a little better now."

Sigvin frowned.

"I don't follow," she said.

"You think what you've found is a coincidence, then," Adjutant mused. "That's understandable, as you never saw the same unfold out west. But this is happening on purpose, Sigvin."

Because that was the Carrion Lord's way. The Clans could not truly be a part of a stable Praes as they were, so the man had set to smothering the aspects of orc culture that weren't compatible with the Dread Empire he envisioned: the raiding, the nomadism, the factionalism. And as was typical of that particular monster, he'd gone about it through a method that the people being changed would not fight because it benefitted them. Because Sigvin was right to see the Clans being made dependent on the south, being bound tighter, but she was missing something: most orcs were better off this way. It was why the Legions and the Carrion Lord remained wildly popular in the Steppes to this day.

The Legions introduced wealth from the outside instead of the same limited wealth being competed over by clans, which meant that the Clans could actually grow now. And the way to bring home that gold was war, which Hakram's people loved, and it just so happened that it drained the Steppes out of the same youngbloods who'd be pushing for raids and fighting between clans. And it was a form of war that required training, which took time, so why shouldn't clans move less? They could afford to now that they were wealthier, anyway. Which they would remain, so long as they kept sending warriors to the Legions. Then once those soldiers returned home, having fought side by side with each other and humans, they found that fighting with the Clans and the rest of the Empire lost its allure.

How many of your old army friends would you have to kill so you could steal cattle worth less than a few months of Legion pay?

Hakram sighed. This wasn't Malicia's work. It was not the Empress' way to change a system when she already mastered it. Yet

she'd likely recognized the trend and was not against reversing it, because orcs truly integrated into Praes were yet another power block she must handle. One that espoused military virtues she distinctly lacked, to boot. Shortly before the Liesse Rebellion, Malicia had forced the Clans to pay the tributes they'd withheld during the reign of Nefarious, which had had the effect of lowering orc enrolment in the Legions. This now seemed less like an isolated incident and more the like the beginning of a comprehensive policy that had just recently received its crowning jewel.

*Malicia made lords of the Steppes*, Adjutant thought, *which seems like bringing us into the fold but is functionally the opposite.* Her lords of the Steppes did not hold land. They collected the orcish tributes on behalf of the Tower, which was an additional layer of separation between Praes and the Clans. Gatekeepers of influence who, by the very limitations of their role – duties that would see them despised by other orcs, authority that derived directly from the Tower – could never rise to be a threat to her reign. Now *that* elegant little twist, the gift that doubled as clipped wings, had Malicia's signature over it. And it explained why the forces behind the Blackspears were so willing to cut a deal with the Dread Empress.

"So when Troke makes cause with Malicia, your clan backs him because he's not just looking to be a lord of the Steppes," Hakram gravelled. "He wants to be the *High Lord* of the Steppes."

Someone in a position to undo Legion influence, who by virtue of their title could stand between the Clans and the Empire and force a heathy distance. Sigvin bared her fangs at him, openly pleased.

"So you do understand," she said, then slightly bared her neck in a display of vulnerability. "I had feared you might not."

No wonder the Split Tree were good as sown to Troke's side, he thought. Both the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves were heavily tied to the Legions and had no intention of changing that policy considering how it'd paid off for them. As far as the Split Tree Clan was concerned, the alliance behind Hakram was perhaps the sole coalition of clans they could not under any circumstances allow to win. Otherwise the Legions would sink their hooks into all the larger clans and the trend would grow irreversible. Adjutant pushed off from the marking post.

"Leaving already?" Sigvin asked.

"I need to think," Hakram simply said.

About how this could be turned around.

About whether it should.

—

It took time to gather two hundred stones, enough that darkness fell.

At the edge of the great camp that'd risen up around Chagoro, Hakram Deadhand sat alone in the dirt with a bright moon hung high above his head. Before him lay only flatlands of long grass and the distant rising expanse of the Northern Steppes, a horizon of nothingness crowned by cold stars. And just the way he had when he'd been a boy, Hakram stacked stones. Seventy in a pile to the left. A rough estimate of the clans that backed Troke Snaketooth and his Blackspears, the orcs that stood behind the dream of a High Lord of the Steppes. Forty-six in a pile to the right, Dag and Oghuz and old loyalties. The promises of the Conquest, faithfully kept, and hunger for more of the same.

In between the piles stood a sea of undecided clans, smaller alliances that a day's turn could make or break. Orcs with their ear to the wind, waiting to hear how it would turn.

Through this, Hakram had laid out the bare shape of the *taratoplu* taking place at the fortress of Chagoro. This was the game he had been playing since he came here, promises and sigils and duels. It was the game Troke Snaketooth had been beating him at, would keep beating him at. Hakram did not know the lay of this land the way the Blackspears chieftain did, the friendships and feuds and shared stories that bound the Clans together as a people. Which meant, in truth, that he had been playing the wrong game. So Hakram leaned forward to trace three symbols in the dirt with a finger of bone: a helmet, a skull and a fang.

The helmet he knew best, what it stood for. The clans that had tied themselves to the Legions, to the Reforms, to the empire promised them by the Carrion Lord. The chiefs who wanted to make some camps permanent, kept through all seasons. Only part of the clan would stay at first, for forges and drilling warriors and trade, but it would grow from there. Southern wealth pouring in, ever-closer ties to the empire, old ways abandoned in favour of more practical ones. Clans that heeded this new path would flourish, those that resisted it would wither and die. That path for the Clans had its roots in the alliance under Dag and Oghuz, a tie strong enough that repeated defeats had not shattered their faction.

The skull he'd only begun to understand today. The clans that saw ahead of them a world where the Steppes were swallowed up by the Empire, where orcs forsook Kharsum for Lower Miezana and began singing of emperors instead of warlords. Where the Steppes grew ugly towns like tumours, imperial colonies of greenskin legionaries in the heartlands of the orcs. Those clans wanted disengagement. Ties with the Legions weakened and a unifying leader – be they warlord or high lord – to keep the Tower at bay

so the Clans could become as a nation. Because that was what lay behind Sigvin's talk of culture: the Steppes as a kingdom within the Dread Empire.

That path had its roots in the backers of Snake Troketooth, but would not have great loyalty to the man. It had chosen him as a candidate because he could be influenced and served their purposes, not out of any love for the cheiftain

And the last, the fang, was somehow both the simplest and the most complex of the three. It was everyone else, the chiefs and clans who cared nothing for either sort of talk. Hunger had no philosophy, for all that the Wasteland liked to pretend otherwise. The great majority of the clans would follow who promised the best plunder, the most food, who allowed them to settle grudges to their advantage and earn glory in battle. Some of these had gone Troke's way already because he looked like the winner and they wanted to be on the winner's side. There was no vision of the future behind them save a gaping maw biting down on the world, and more orcs thinking this way than the other two put together. It was a path without intent, the Clans remaining as they were and letting Creation pass them by. Walking away from the end of the Age of Wonder, guests in their own world.

These were, Hakram Deadhand thought, the three paths now laid out for the Clans: integration, disengagement, abstention. Only they were all flawed, he thought, and so he turned to address the night.

"You would argue for the helmet, I know," Hakram said. "Even though you refused your own people that fate and crowned Vivienne so she could reforge the broken shards of the Old Kingdom."

Catherine would lean the way of the Legions because the Legions were as much her home as the land she'd bled so much for. It would change the orcs, she might argue, but would it be for the worse? Raiding put the Clans at odds with everyone around them, internal wars weakened them as a people and permanent towns would make life better for tens of thousands of orcs. It would be a greater good than evil, she'd argue.

"But there will be a price," Hakram told the night. "We will become the Duni of the north. Good for fighting and labour but not *truly* Praesi. We lose everything that we are without becoming equals."

Perhaps in one or two generations if the Reforms held that would become untrue, but that was a roll of the dice. *Would* the Reforms hold? Even if the Carrion Lord came to rule, as Catherine wanted, would his successors continue his policies? It was betting the fate Clans on trust in a Tower whose steps dripped with the blood of a thousand coups. Hakram's gaze drifted to the left, where another ghost waited for him to argue with. There was not a doubt

in his mind that Vivienne Dartwick would be on the side of disengagement, of the skull.

"You'd argue that the Split Tree are right," Hakram said. "That Praes would ruin us and only distance can prevent it. A High Lord of the Steppes would keep away the Tower and let us strengthen ourselves, make our own laws and change on our own terms."

But that, too, was ignoring some truths. Because even Sigvin, who cursed the Legions with her eyes, had not spoken of ending ties with them entirely. Engaging with Praes enriched the Clans in a way that isolation simply could not. Starvation was no longer decided by the year being good or bad, by a raid or a war having gone one way or the other. Already the Clans traded almost as much with humans as they did with each other, by the estimates of the Eyes, and ending that trend would starve and impoverish half the Steppes. The Clans could live without Praes but to grow, to *thrive*? The Dread Empire was needed.

As for the Praesi, the land the orcs lived in was a heavy hand on the fate of the people.

"I don't believe we would hold, without either war or Praes," Hakram told the night. "We are not Callow, Vivienne. Even at our peak, we were not a nation in the human way of it. We unite against something, someone – or when there is another way to gain aside from eating each other."

How long would the closed kingdom that Sigvin dreamed of truly last once the war ended? How many clans backing Troke would stay loyal, when their bellies were full and their chests filled with plunder and there was nothing left to do but return home to the same old feuds? It was building a tower on sand. And that left only one path, the fang. Burying one's head in the sand, failing to make anything of the great gathering at Chagoro. And so the night could only wear one face: golden eyes and dark skin. Akua Sahelian. Another who now sat at crossroads, the threshold of changes only dimly felt.

"I can break it," the Adjutant said. "The taratoplu. I would only need to raise another two past forty stones to take the wind out of Troke's sails, and I... know that it can be done."

The aspect pulsed in him faintly. **Find**. If he went looking for the hammers that would bring down this house, he would find them. This he knew, sure as dawn. Hakram could prevent anyone from winning, play on greed and fear and hope. Had he not stood at the side of the uncontested mistress of that method for many years? And it was what he was meant to do, as the Adjutant, if he could not secure the help of the Clans for the Grand Alliance. It was better than letting them side with Malicia. And yet he did not rise.

"What is it like, Sahelian, where you sit?" he asked the night.  
"It is cold away from the fire, cold enough madness earns the ring of sense and certainties turn to sand between your fingers?"

Hakram had gotten a taste of what it would be like, losing Catherine. Losing the Woe. Becoming just another of those left behind, buried or forgotten. And while the shard of fear at the heart of that had been put to rest by the Grey Pilgrim as a city died around them, there could be no return to the way things had been afterwards. It was different now because he was different and she was different. Pretending otherwise did neither of them any favours. Now they both knew they could hurt each other in ways they could not, would not forgive.

There was no unlearning that.

"I don't want to ruin them," he admitted. "To give them a nothing-future, to rob them of the pivot everyone else was allowed."

And this was something he wanted for himself. What a small, terrifying truth that was to be echoing so large in his mind. Because Hakram knew that, as much as he would like to blame the ghosts and the night, he was the only one here. And already he knew, deep down, that if he was not satisfied by any of the paths others would lay out for the Clans then there was only one answer left.

He just didn't want to look that truth in the eye.

Instead he looked back at the camp, the torches lighting up the night around the tall Soninke fortress. What did he owe these people, anyway? Hakram had left for the War College and never looked back. Life in the Steppes had left him adrift, a leaf in the wind. It had been a long way from here, from this land of gnawing, that he had found a home. What did ten thousand miles of snow and the poor fools in it matter to him, that he should sacrifice for them? And it would be a sacrifice, he would not delude himself otherwise. He and Catherine had been bound by an oath under moonlight, and it would be the end of that oath. Even if it was taken again, it would not be the same.

So Hakram turned his gaze ahead, finding... nothing. Empty plains as far as the eye could see, bathed in white. The same kind of emptiness he had glimpsed in Scribe after she was cut adrift. He'd wondered, sometimes, if she had been like him from the start. If becoming one of the Calamities had been like someone blew colours into a world of grey, like finally she could taste and hate and want to *be someone*. Only it'd not been about the Calamities, had it? It'd been about the Carrion Lord, and the Carrion Lord had set her free of his service in an act of loving cruelty. Cat still thought Eudokia would turn on them, but Hakram knew better. No one would risk being scalded like that twice.



And had Hakram not, this very day, boasted in the privacy of his own mind that he knew how to learn from enemies and allies both? The Webweaver had been one and the other, at different times, and ever a warning since they encountered each other in Salia.

"A temple built on a single pillar will fall," Hakram said, quoting an old Miezani proverb.

And he still did not want to ruin his kind. To make them less than they could be. There was a path to chart, he thought. One he could dimly make out in the gloom of the night. A way to take from the empire without being taken, to stand without standing alone. It would be dangerous and delicate, play great powers against each other and raise a banner that could not be easily lowered. But it could be done. Hakram just wished that someone else could do it in his stead. Yet the stones did not lie, he thought, looking down. They never did. In a game of diminishing returns there could be no winner, only shades of defeat.

And if not Hakram, then who?

Moonlight painted the empty plains pale, and the stones at his feet too. Adjutant – no, not that anymore he thought. Perhaps never again. He was not making the choice of that path. Hakram Deadhand rose to his feet, bathed in moonlight, with no one to pull him up. A western breeze rustled across tall grass, a shiver, and old words came to him. The Old Boast, which orcs had once sung blade in hand when the hands and blades were still theirs.

"I made an empire out of nothing

So,

Warring under the summer sun

Rivers ran red, the sky did weep

As I raised a city of clay

To rule men from far away.

But as my glory fades to gray

And rides to me my own red day

Now I know clay does not keep,

And that rivers, both ways they run:

So,

I made an empire out of nothing."

Stillness reigned in his wake. *Warlord*, the wind whispered against the grass. The poem was an old boast, an old warning. Kingdoms came, kingdoms went and so much for their petty kings. People were never as important as they thought they were.

But if not Hakram, then who?

So he went back to the torches, to the camp.

To the work that needed doing.

## Interlude: North III

*"The diplomat's victory is to let the opponent win on your terms."*

– Prince Fernando of Salamans

Hakram hadn't put armour on.

A loose shirt, trousers and boots were all he wore as he held his axe loosely in his grasp, watching his opponent move. Dag Clawtoe had laughed off the challenge at first, thinking it a jest, but the laughter had gone away when Hakram failed to join in. The older orc was taking the duel seriously and had come in champion's garb: helm, mail and greaves. Dag kept his shield up and his sword raised, circling as warriors pounded the ground around them. The jemmek was liked by his clan and their allies, but orcs liked a good fight even more.

"I'll end it without killing you," Dag Clawtoe growled.

Hakram did not answer. It was one of his weaknesses as a champion – the way his people saw it – that he had no taste for that sort of banter. The rough edge of his tongue he reserved only for people he was going to kill. The tall orc took a step forward on the black earth and without missing a beat Dag attacked as he moved. A short push forward, shield steady as the blade thrust up towards his armpit. A smooth movement, well practised, and Hakram's limbs of steel were not as quick as those of flesh had been. It didn't matter, because he'd been waiting for the strike: the moment his foot touched the ground he was already pivoting, carrying his momentum forward as Dag's thrust passed him by.

His elbow smashed into the other orc's helmeted forehead, slamming him to the floor.

Warriors roared in approval as Dag cursed and rolled away, slapping away Hakram's light swing with his shield before rising into a crouch. He'd lost his helmet, as Hakram had wanted. The leather strap had snapped and the helm fallen into the grass, shaking free Dag's hair – a long black braid going from his

forehead to his back. Hakram almost rubbed at the elbow that'd struck the helm, but he knew he was imagining the ache. Steel did not grow tender from striking at steel. Hakram rolled his shoulder, loosening it, and waited for the wary jemmek to come for him again. Dag hesitated, but he would be jeered at by his own warriors if he looked afraid of the fight.

So he came, measured this time. A feint to the left, trying to draw Hakram's blade, but when it passed without answer the other orc shot forward. Surprised, Hakram took a step back that saved him from being swept entirely off his feet when Dag's shield bashed into his chest. His footing slipped but he backed away again, only to earn another bash – at the head, but he was ready this time. Hakram's axe came down and though he'd misjudged the distance it still came down on the shield arm Dag had exposed by striking. Instead of the axe-head against mail it was the shoulder that found its mark, a clean blow that had the jemmek shouting in pain.

The arm wasn't quite broken but it was hurt. Dag was no greenhorn, though, and pain didn't stop him. Hakram was hit in the shoulder by the shield, forcing him in a backwards stumble, and in a discreet thrust under that cover the jemmek's sword came for his belly. That he caught with fingers of bone, steel scraping the pale, but the other orc used the grip to tackle him. Hakram rocked backwards, swallowing a curse – if he was pushed to the ground this was lost – as Dag smashed their foreheads together with a hellish scream. He dropped his axe, useless so close anyway, but even pushing back he found that Dag had the advantage on him. Hakram growled and tried to smash their foreheads again, but Dag put the shield in the way. Inspiration. Steel fingers closed around the rim of the shield, yanking it down. The other orc roared in pain, his wounded arm twisted, and fangs flashed as he ripped through his own shield straps to break free.

That'd been a mistake.

Hakram arm rose and he bashed Dag's head in with the freed shield. Dag drew back, yelping, but it wasn't enough. One, two, three more hits to the head and down Dag Clawtoe went. Eyes wide and unseeing he dropped onto the black earth, only barely conscious. It was done. Hakram breathed out, tossing away the shield. Howls and shouts of approval erupted around them, dragging back Dag to some semblance of wakefulness. He rose to his knees, expression still dazed.

"Why?" the other orc asked, quietly enough he was barely heard beneath the shouts. "I'm not the chief, Deadhand. What would you take from me, being *camp-leader*?"

Hakram shook his head.

"They backed you," he said, gesturing at the warriors around them. "And they still will."

Dag scowled, confused.

"They back you," Hakram calmly said, "only now *you* back *me*."

Confusion turned to anger but the other orc did not argue. It was not the place of the defeated to argue terms with the victor. Yet there was still an argument ahead of him, Hakram thought as he left the duelling circle and traded backslaps with cheering warriors. Further back Oghuz the Lamé, chief of the Red Shields and the other leading light of the alliance, was waiting with a few of his warriors at his side. The old orc snorted when Hakram approached.

"You're not a Red Shield," Oghuz said. "Unlike Dag I don't owe you the courtesy of accepting a challenge."

"It's not a fight I'm looking for," Hakram said.

"Isn't it?" Oghuz scoffed, but after a moment he sighed.

He barked at his warriors to give him space, room enough that the two of them would be able to speak without being overheard.

"That was a mistake," Oghuz said, gesturing at the duelling grounds. "Dag had weaknesses as a man to front for but you have even more. You think we'll just let ourselves be pressed into Callow's service in, Named or not? It's a worthy queen you're serving, Deadhand, but she's not one of ours."

Hakram did not bother to answer that. It was a pit of an argument, one he wouldn't be able to climb out of should he fall. So he took another path.

"The duel," Hakram said. "What did you think of it?"

"You're more used to using a shield with that axe," Oghuz replied. "And you still cover for the metal like it's flesh when you don't think about it."

Hakram waited a moment, knowing the old champion would have more to say.

"It was unkind to Dag to stretch it out," the older orc added. "You could have knocked him half dead with that first elbow strike."

The tall orc smiled without showing teeth.

"No," he said, "I could not have."

Because he could no longer feel his aspects. Could barely even see his Name through the shadow cast by what he might yet become. Oghuz did not miss the implication. There weren't a lot of reasons why Hakram would be losing his Name, and only one that walked hand in hand with forcing himself to the front of the alliance between their two clans. The old orc let out a low hiss, worrying his lip.

"I do not seek service to anyone," Hakram said, and like that the other man knew it to be true.

Now it was on Oghuz to decide whether or not Hakram Deadhand was someone he could live with as the Warlord of their age. Tension stretched out.

"Ours are hungry Gods," the old orc finally said, leaning on his cane. "Best to eat our fill before they catch up."

A look up and down.

"You'll do."

A pause, then a calculatingly casual question.

"Do you get on well with my daughter?"

Hakram grimaced. That wouldn't be happening. Even if Juniper didn't kill him Aisha absolutely would – and she'd probably get away with it too.

"Too much woman for me," he replied, and the old man laughed.

That was one alliance behind him then, Hakram thought. Time to visit the other.

—

He was being watched.

The twins were already waiting for him when Hakram reached the grounds of the Split Tree Clan. Sigvin and Sigvun were easiest to tell apart by the ritual scars on their bodies: the latter's looked like woven crescent moons, the former's like crisscrossing bite marks. Sigvun had once implied he wouldn't mind Hakram getting the sort of closer look at those scars his sister had been granting, but the tall orc had turned him down. His preferences were well set. The twin had shrugged it off and Hakram was on amicable terms with both – as amicable as one could be while trying to have opposite warlords elected, anyway. He might kill them, or they him, but it wouldn't be killing done in the red.

"Back already?" Sigvin teased.

Sigvun cocked a hairless brow.

"Should I speak to our kin about raising a pillar?" he gravely asked.

Hakram rolled his eyes. Old-fashioned, the Split Tree. Hardly anyone still hung woven crowns on sculpted pillars anymore: weddings were family feasts under a shaman nowadays, not ceremonies to attract the blessings of spirits.

"Take me to your chieftain," he said.

Though both kept light expressions, he could see the stiffening in the way they stood. Uncertainty in Sigvun's eyes but triumph in Sigvin's. *She thinks she has swayed me*, Hakram thought. In a way she had. The twins agreed without trouble but the light conversation died and they walked the rest of the way in silence. He spent the time considering he knew of Hegvor Allspeak, chief of the Split Tree Clan. Which was little, for though Hakram could think offhand of half a dozen feuds she had mediated and how he did not even know the old woman's age. Much about the chief herself was obscured, which he suspected to be on purpose.

He was not made to wait long before being led to a great tent where three orcs, by the looks of them none younger than sixty winters, waited seated. Introductions were briskly made. The oldest shaman of the clan, Bjarte, sat to the right. To the left sat Gulda Hardhead, the most honoured champion of the Split Tree, and between them sat a woman of long white hair with a hard scar across her nose. Hegvor Allspeak, whose eyes were of an unsettlingly pale yellow bordering on green. Hakram was invited to sit across from them at a low table, an honour that was not granted to the twins. They sat on the ground, near the back of the tent. The two were trusted, Hakram thought, but their age meant their influence was limited.

Hegvor pushed across the table a small bowl and cut of dried meat.

"I offer you meat and drink from my table," the chieftain said.

Brutally salty sheep and hard aragh were what Hakram wolfed down, but that was an old and well-known negotiating trick. At least they hadn't used Taghreb spices, which would have had him panting for water throughout the entire talks.

"Hail, Hegvor Allspeak," he said.

"Hail, Hakram Deadhead," the old woman replied. "The twins say you ask of my time."

"I do," he said.

She frowned.

"Not, I think, for what Sigvin hopes of you," Hegvor said. "So what it is you have come for, Deadhand, if not to lend your name to the better cause?"

Hakram's dead fingers laid against the table, its intricate carvings dimly felt to his senses. Like a... pressure, nothing like what a hand of flesh had been. And the pressures were lighter now, for the same reason that Hakram thought he would no longer be able to Find something he sought.

"Before I answer that question," he said, "I want to describe something to you."

The bone fingers drummed against the wood, a sound like a rat gnawing.

"Within a week the taratoplu will have to disperse because it can no longer be fed," Hakram said. "As the pressure mounts on all clans to gather behind a banner, the Graven Bone and the Stag-Crowned will cede territories to some of the clans bordering them. Those clans will then come to support Troke Snaketooth and get him elected as High Lord of the Steppes."

The Graven Bone and Stag-Crowned were the two strongest supporters of Troke, despite being the two largest southern clans after his own, because Malicia had also named them lords of the Steppes. They would be his natural lieutenants, the highest under him after his election. That was well worth territorial concessions to their own rivals, especially when this was an offer that the Blackspears themselves could not make – if Troke was seen to be weakening his clan to rope in others, he would be made into a laughingstock.

"Dread Empress Malicia will recognize the title and formally charge High Lord Troke with putting down the rebelling High Seat of Nok," Hakram said. "Most clans will fall in line at the prospect of plunder and even the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields will join the host."

Utter silence from across the table.

"To secure Troke's position after the sack, the Wolves and the Shields will be given the honour of being the first into the breach at Nok," he calmly continued. "You'll collude with either Malicia or High Lord Dakarai to make their losses crippling, then keep them crippled after you withdraw to the Steppes by keeping away returning legionaries."

His fingers skittered across the wood still.

"You keep propping up Troke, after that, but begin looking to the future," Hakram said. "Marry a rising name in the Bones or the Stags to one of your kin, then lay the grounds for them to be Snaketooth's successor. Then you begin pushing for what you actually want."

The tall orc showed teeth.

"At a guess? Bringing back the bronze urus as our coinage, a council of shamans to mediate clan disputes like in the ancient Hordes and fixed yearly gatherings under enforced truce," Hakram continued. "If Troke backs you, all the better. If he doesn't, he has an accident and you get the prepared successor in power where they will be duly grateful."

Hakram's dead hand went still.

"How close am I?" he asked.

A long moment of silence.

"Only one yearly gathering," Barjte said, the shaman smiling. "We would consecrate holy grounds for the first time since the Miezens, our High Seat of the Steppes."

Good, Hakram thought. They had, without knowing it, come to agree with one of his own notions in principle. Now he just needed to survive the rest of this conversation. His eyes were on Hegvor, so he was surprised when the answer came from behind.

"I *told* you, grandmother," Sigvin erupted. "We should have tried to bring him from the start, it's such a waste that-"

"Be silent, girl," Hagvor peevishly cut in, "until you stop thinking with your snatch."

Sigvin's mouth closed with an angry click of fangs. Her grandmother – the things you learned, Hakram mused – turned a cool gaze on him.

"You're a clever man, Deadhand," she said. "So tell me the reason you've come up with that I should let you leave this tent alive."

So much for drink and meat from their table, Hakram thought amusedly. His people were not the Taghreb, to hold the law of hospitality as sacrosanct, but that's been a rather hasty turnabout. Still, there was nothing like the threat of death to get a man's blood flowing.

"It won't work," Hakram said. "Even if you kill me and get away with it, even if I say nothing, it won't work."

Gulda Hardhead bared her fangs.



"You think us fools, boy," the old champion said. "Think we haven't thought it through, maybe, that since we keep to old ways we're just sav-"

"I think you haven't read reports of the Eyes of the Empire annotated by the Scribe," Hakram calmly interrupted.

A start of surprise.

"You know things I do not," he said. "That I could not learn or did not care to. Are you so proud to believe the opposite cannot be true?"

Because if it were so, if they were a closed door, then he would have to kill them all. Something pulsed in his belly at the thought, almost eager. A craving not entirely his. He had rustled feathers with the brusque answer, but where Gulda was growling and Bjarte looked politely skeptical their leader only looked thoughtful. Considering. Examining where she, too, might have been wrong. Something like hope bloomed in Hakram, chasing away the bloodthirst.

"Trade," Hagvor Allspeak finally said. "You think trade will bury us, even if we restrict it."

"You're a decade too late," Hakram said. "The total volume of goods traded between the empire and the Steppes is now about three fifths of what is traded within the Steppes, by the Tower's estimates."

Surprise from all of them, but only the chief and the shaman grasped what that implied. Hagvor grimaced.

"You can't cut the flow of goods without impoverishing and starving too many people," Hakram said. "Either Troke turns on you to keep his seat or he'll be facing rebellion from half the clans."

"An empty tent is an invitation," Bjarte quoted.

They realized it too, then. Their measures were all sensible ones. Bronze urus could be minted in the Steppes, there were rich deposits of tin and copper barely touched, and it would mean no longer being dependent on Praesi coinage. A council to mediate disputes would clamp down on internal wars save those sanctioned by the 'High Lord', which would be used to purge enemies of the throne. Holy grounds bound to the title of High Lord would make an effective capital for the Clans that could serve as a place of truce and a way for the Split Tree to begin their revival of what they considered to be the heart of orcish culture.

Only none of this could be done if Troke bucked them off or the Clans fell into civil war. In Hakram's opinion, Troke cutting

them loose to keep his seat would likely result in civil war anyway – without their diplomatic support and reputation, he was a much weaker man and their people responded only one way to weakness. And while that civil war burned, Praes would turn its attention to them. It might be that the exiled orc legionaries would return with the Tower's backing or that the Empire would raise other lords of the Steppes outside Troke's authority, to be honest the exact form didn't matter.

Whoever held the Tower would not tolerate a troublesome and rebellious bloc just like the Tribes existing in the north of the Dread Empire, so they'd intervene. Weaken and divide. The end result would likely be what the Split Tree were trying to avoid in the first place with their grand plan: southern clans tied up with the Legions and permanently at war with the fading clans further north. A buffer state the Tower could use as manpower for its armies and could never rise to become a threat to Ater.

"We will adapt," Hagvor Allspeak finally said, tone weary. "Change our approach. For this chance I thank you, Hakram Deadhand."

Hakram hummed. He did not take the implied dismissal.

"Your answer's not in closing the door," he said.

"It's even less in being eaten by the Tower," Hagvor curtly said.

"It's too late to cut ties to the degree you envisioned," he bluntly replied. "It would cost too much to too many people who have no reason to listen to you except force. But that's the wrong approach, anyway, because distance isn't what you actually want – it's just the method you decided would get you that."

"And what would you know of what we want, Adjutant?" Gulda Hardhead scorned.

Hakram wondered if she truly disliked him or whether this was a ploy. One friend, one foe, Hagvor striking the balance. Regardless, there was an odd pall on the room after she spoke. Most faces were touched with a frown, Bjarte even casting a wary look around. *They can't feel the Name anymore*, Hakram realized. *The pressure of it*. The longer the conversation had gone on, the more the last wisps of his moonlit oath had gone away. Casting the Name in his face rang wrong to their ears because he no longer held it. The chieftain considered him with wary eyes. He smiled amicably, never showing teeth.

"You want a unified orc state with strong enough foundations that the empire can't absorb it," he said. "You want to avoid the Steppes being empty because all the youths went south to the Legions, coming back only to live in Legion towns and raise their children to do the same. You want to avoid clan weavers

abandoning the trade because it's easier to buy ten baskets from Okoro at a copper each, to avoid storytellers reading from Praesi books instead of learning the old sagas by rote. You want for there to be someone other than Soninke scholars able to read our glyphs in forty years."

Gulda rocked back like he'd just slapped her across the face.

"I understand what you want perfectly," Hakram Deadhand. "You're just going about it wrong."

His steel hand clasped the edge of the table, making it creak.

"You think that by making a few opportunities you'll turn our people away from Praes, but you're not looking at the numbers," he said. "You'll make a standing army at your holy grounds, but how many warriors will be able to be part of it? A thousand, five? The Legions will take *anyone* and make them rich. And maybe destroying the clans with ties to the empire would make room, free land and wealth, but it won't work like that in practice. Not unless you slaughter the entire clans and none one has the stomach for that so they'll move into the Empire, migrate, and then it's the same problem you thought you avoided only the border's thirty leagues south. Your fundamental mistake is that you are denying opportunities instead of offering better ones."

"We cannot outbid the Dread Empire," Hagvor quietly said.

"Then stop kneeling to it," Hakram flatly replied. "You are trying to mend this from a position of weakness that no one has forced on you but yourself."

"There's not enough support for rebellion," Gulda Hardhead told him.

Her tone was, he noted, significantly warmer than before.

"Not for secession, maybe," Hakram replied. "But rebellion? We're already rebels just by gathering here. How many clans do you think would scream their throats sore in approval, if the proposal was instead to march on Ater and cram our terms down the Tower's throat?"

"Many," Bjarte said. "But what would that solve, Deadhand? We get lenience for a generation, that is all. All the dooms are pushed back, not ended."

The white-haired chief hummed at him.

"You want to make... opportunities," she said. "That rival theirs. Only they'll be ours, not the Tower's."

"Trading with Praes, learning from it, being tied to it – this is the trend of the Steppes," Hakram said. "And it cannot be

reversed without prohibitive costs. But none of these are unhealthy if they don't lead to our being digested by the Empire. And the key to that is for us to offer another way."

"There is not enough wealth in the Steppes," Bjarte said. "Ours are not rich lands, save in grass and frost."

"So why does the Empire care to assimilate us in the first place?" Hakram replied. "Manpower. Warriors. That is what we make that they want from us, Praes and Callow both. Orcs soldiers have been the backbone of the two most successful armies Calernia has seen since the days of Triumphant."

Hagvor caught on first.

"Mercenaries are illegal in Praes," she pointed out.

"Laws change at the end of a sword, in this empire," Hakram calmly said. "All the time. Why should it not be ours, for once?"

Rumbles of approval from the twins at his back. The older heads needed more, though. Could see further.

"These armies took more than orcs to be victorious," Hagvor said. "They make war in a new way. Companies, not warbands."

"Let warbands do the work of warbands and companies the work of companies," Hakram said. "If we must raid, let us raid. But battles are a soldier's trade and best left to soldiers."

They didn't like hearing it, but that was the reality of it.

"Clans can't make an army like that," Gulda Hardhead said. "Not on the move. It takes too much training for the drills. You'd need a settlement to support it."

"A settlement where the wealth of retiring legionaries could flow," he replied, "and be put to use to benefit the Clans instead of unmake them."

Many orcs who'd lived in towns and cities for decades would balk at returning to tents anyway. They all knew that. A solid roof over one's head was a comfort few liked to let go of. And while they didn't like the face of it – a town for Legion orcs, for those who wanted to leave the old ways – they'd already agreed to a city in principle. Their holy grounds for the High Lord of the Steppes would have been the same thing, only smaller and poorer and badly run.

"It might grow to threaten our ways, this settlement," Bjarte said. "The sole city of the orcs yet not bound to their ways."

"So send shamans and teachers," Hakram said. "And if you worry of the Clans being adrift, raise your holy grounds in the Steppes to rival it."

Hagvor's eyes narrowed, the eerie tint of them making them look like jewels in the light.

"You speak as if this settlement would not be in the Steppes," she said.

"No," Hakram said, "it wouldn't be."

A beat as she figured it out.

"You mean to keep this fortress," she said, sounding a little impressed.

"If the Dread Empire of Praes would keep us in the fold," Hakram Deadhand said, "then let it pay for that privilege. Lands and rights. Is that not what all the High Seats rebel over?"

Hard smiles all around. He had them, he thought. Only the mirth went away.

"Troke has made bargains with the Tower," Hagvor Allspeak finally said. "They would not pair with the path you describe."

"No," Hakram quietly agreed, "it is true that Troke Snaketooth cannot deliver this to you."

And he said nothing else, only meeting her eerie eyes with his own unflinching stare. Silence stood, stretched, stayed. Like a physical force, strong enough to cut with a knife. Until the white-haired chieftain rose to her feet, limbs cracking and back bent. Hakram did not look away.

Risen, she knelt.

"Warlord," Hagvor Allspeak swore, and so it was true.

Hakram breathed in as every other in the tent knelt the same, letting the feeling settle over him. The claim. Already he could feel his rivals. One the south, distant and faded. An old claim, long set aside but not quite gone. Grem One-Eye still stood with few equals in the eyes of his people. And another one, closer and sharper and just as aware of him as Hakram was aware of them. Troke Snaketooth had been further along his path than anyone else dreamed of.

And so, Hakram thought, it would end in red.

—

Within the hour Troke Snaketooth gave answer.

With unfortunately characteristic cunning, the chief struck where no one had expected him to. Four fires erupted across the camp, which was not unusual given the loose approach of some clans to precautions against this, but these were no accidents. They burned down three of the largest repositories of dried meat in the great camp surrounding Chagoro and the largest tent of the Brazen Bird Clan – whose territories near seaside salt flats made the main trader of salt in the Steppes and the sole clan to have brought a large amount of it to the taratoplu. Troke had burned the food reserves and the ingredient needed to preserve butchered animals. Clans would now live on the cattle they could butcher, which would not last a week. Three, four days at best.

Now that a rival had appeared Troke meant to force a vote while he still had numbers and the wind in his sail.

It was a good strategy, Hakram was forced to admit. The chief of the Blackspears tried to summon the clans into the fortress barely an hour after the fires, claiming they needed discussion, which would make things even worse. It would deny Hakram time to grow his support: the Split Tree were mustering like-minded clans in his behalf, but those talks would take time. Two hours was not long enough. It was Oghuz who found a solution: he ordered some of his warriors to terrify their own clan's herds and let the cattle loose, resulting into a stampede away from the camp. The Red Shield refused the summons, as they urgently needed to gather back their sheep and pigs.

Oghuz's champions then loudly implied that this scattering was no accident and that all of Troke's opponents might come to face the same troubles, which had enough clans wary of the Blackspears the Snaketooth had to push back the talks until sundown.

Torches lit up the great hall of the fortress of Chagoro, which in truth had been the mess hall before being made into gathering grounds for the Clans. No more than three heads could enter by clan, which still meant more than six hundred orcs packed tight between the walls. Each chieftain came with a painted shield, their vote to cast, though counting them could get... combative. Accusations of miscounting or lies were common and usually settled in blood – every chief had come tonight with a champion among their three. The Blackspears and their allies had come first, at least an hour early, so they had the back of the hall to themselves and an imposing position. They looked many and strong, which mattered more than most like to admit.

Hakram would make Troke rue that trick before all said and done.

He came as one of the three for the Howling Wolves, standing with the clans of his birth as the shaman whose day it was to officiate – a woman from the Arrant Axes, a Blackspear ally – sang one of the old songs of praise to the Hungry Gods and reiterated these to be truce grounds. Only duels would be allowed

here, no red fights. Unsurprisingly, though half a dozen chiefs clamoured to be the first to speak it was Troke who was chosen by the shaman. The chieftain of the Blackspears was a tall and well-formed orc, with short choppy hair and three golden rings in each cheek that made the pale scars on his face stand out. He was not built as thickly as some orcs, but as a warrior he was second in his clan only to his husband.

Skarod Longaxe, the envoy that had come to Wolof and now stood at his husband's side with cold eyes. Hakram would rather avoid fighting that one. There were a lot of dirty jokes about the reason for that wedding being that Skarod should have been called Longspear instead, but the champion was one of the finest killers in the Steppes. He'd killed three dozen warriors in duels without taking a wound, it was said, and only gotten better since. Hakram was not certain he would win should they fight.

"We're about to go hungry," Troke Snaketooth said.

His speaking voice was smooth and carried clearly. That'd been practised, Hakram was sure of it. The man had always been ambitious. There were murmurs among the assembled orcs, but no great exclamation of disagreement or surprise. Most chiefs had either put it together or made a friend who had, by now, though only the two larger alliances would have a decent idea of the days left before it happened.

"Three days, my shamans say," Troke revealed. "Three days before we'd forced to leave behind this fortress and the choice we're meant to make here."

He swept the hall with his gaze.

"Shame," Troke Snaketooth snarled. "Shame on you, on *us*. How long are we going to stand here quibbling when Praes lies open to our south? Are we going to have to skulk back to the Steppes with our tails between our legs because we couldn't agree on how to swallow the meat in our maws?"

A chief from the far north took offence to that and was given turn to speak by the shaman, but though the man was right that High Lord of the Steppes was a larger choice than what Troke pretended it was not a popular refrain with the hall. Seeing that, the man turned insulting and that was a mistake. Challenges were traded and Skarod Longaxe stepped forward. The chief's two warriors were slain and his own leg crippled as Skarod forced three duels back-to-back. It was a statement, meant to cow smaller clans, but Hakram thought it a mistake. Skarod had taken no wound and tiredness would pass, but if Troke sent out his husband on his behalf too often he'd look like a coward.

The next challenge he'd have to field himself, Hakram thought, or take a hit to his reputation.

Other chiefs stepped forward to accuse Troke of using the situation to grab power, but all toed the line and their accusations weren't winning the hall so they petered out. No one wanted to fight the Blackspears if it won them no support. It wasn't going to be that easy to call for a vote, though. A chieftain from the east, baring her teeth wildly, tossed out a different sort of challenge.

"You speak for you and yours, Troke, but there are others," she said. "Other claims. Will Dag Clawtoe not speak up, if he seeks to be our Warlord?"

That hadn't been arranged, though if it took much longer Hegvor had seen to it someone else would speak along the same lines. Chiefs just liked seeing bears fight in the pit, so many were willing to get that fight started themselves if need be. Only this time it was Hakram who stepped forward, axe at his hip. He could feel Troke's stare on him, the recognition of the claim. The hatred from him and soon his husband. They'd not know for sure until now, then.

"Dag Clawtoe is not who we would we acclaim for Warlord," Hakram said. "I am."

Surprise, some laughter – he was a cripple, after all – but more murmurs. After the initial beat, though, the sound of blades on shields. All save three of the clans that'd supported Dag for Warlord were making known their support of him. Fools had listened to the nose, Hakram knew, but the clever had been counting shields. The shaman called for silence, then reluctantly granted him the right to address the hall.

"You've heard of me," he said, without false humility. "I've fought more battles than anyone in this hall, led armies to victory in the west. I've killed fae and Revenants, monsters and Named. I've been to Arcadia and back, walked beneath the gates of Keter and seen the First Prince of Procer kneel. I'm Hakram Deadhand."

He stared down the hall.

"You've heard of me," he gravelled.

Blades on shields, not only from his allies this time. His people did like a good boast. It didn't mean votes, but it meant he was being heard.

"I stand for Warlord by the weight of my deeds," he said, using the old turn of phrase. "Let them raise or bury me."

A voice finally cut through, belatedly given right to speak by the shaman.



"You're one of the Black Queen's," a chief shouted. "Are we going to kneel to Callow? *Fuck* that."

"That oath came to an end," Hakram said. "I am the Adjutant no longer."

A beat of silence, an idea.

"Do you not agree, Snaketooth?" he added.

Troke looked unpleasantly surprised at being called on, hesitating at the answer. *I win whatever you do*, Hakram thought. Either the Blackspear would lie and deny their shared claim, an action that would weight on any confrontation between them afterwards – a finger on the scales, Catherine would put it – or Hakram would be vouched for by his strongest rival. A word none would gainsay.

"He's not the Adjutant," Troke said, and tried to speak but shouting drowned him out.

The shaman called for silence.

"He's not the Adjutant," Troke repeated, "but he's worse. You're a *guest*, Hakram Deadhand. You left for the Legions and now you come back for the crown Callow can't give you. What would you know of the Steppes?"

Rumbles of approval. Particularly the northern clans, from the Lesser Steppes or close. Some of those thought it suspicious when orcs even talked to humans, much less fought at their side.

"I am an orc," Hakram laughed. "What more do I need to know?"

That landed too, to Troke's visible distaste. Orcs were not so united in their answers about what it meant to be one of their kind that everyone – or even most – in this hall would agree with what Snaketooth would mean by it.

"Funny, though, that making war west would make my scalp less green in your eyes," he continued. "Do you enjoy killing other orcs so very much, Troke?"

Blades on shields. The Blackspears were not beloved even if they were on the rise. They'd crossed many of the clans closest to them over the years, some under Troke himself. The Snaketooth was wise enough not to engage in that, which left room for another chief to speak up and keep questioning whether Hakram was a Callowan spy or not. The woman insulted him quite bluntly, obviously looking for a duel, but Hakram wouldn't fight her himself. Her clan was too small for that and she was likely looking to make a name through this. He looked back, and though Dag was visibly eager to be called on Hakram spoke another name.

"Oghuz."

The old orc laughed, appreciative. Oghuz the Lamé's blade stayed in its sheath as he walked up to fight Chieftain Sarai of the Drifting Leaves. In front of a crowd of hundreds, the old champion brutally beat to death the challenger with his blackwood cane. All it cost him was a cut on his bared arm, which some in the hall would recognize as a habit from his old champion days: there was one such scar on his arm for every kill he'd made duelling. It was not a statement as bold as Troke's, but it served as a stark warning for anyone trying to make a name off of fighting him: try it and you might be remembered as a figure of fun instead.

The right to speak was spread around after that, the shaman granting it to every chieftain trying to drum up support for their own candidature as Warlord – or High Lord of the Steppes, as some took a page from Troke's book instead. Neither Hakram nor the Blackspears spoke up again, not openly anyway. The alliances behind both of them sent people to speak with other clans at the back of the hall, trying to buy support of their own more quietly. For all that many oaths had been given outside this hall, there was a long tradition of deciding which horse to eat only at the very last moment.

Maybe an hour passed and people were getting restless. Dag came to him as Hakram listened to the chief and shaman of the Ice Eaters, who was promising that he knew a ritual involving bathing in human blood that would give magic to all orcs should he be chosen as Warlord. Well, he was definitely standing out from the others.

"We're up to fifty-four," Dag told him. "Troke's nearing on ninety, we think."

Hakram nodded, thinking.

"Call a vote," he said.

Dag looked confused but nodded anyway. An allied chief asked for the right to speak after the Ice Eaters chief left in sullen silence and used it to call for an acclamation, a demand the hall took up with relish. It was rare for an assembly to last so long without a vote being called, often one was asked at the very start, to make it plain where everyone stood before the talks began. Troke smelled something was wrong, Hakram thought, because otherwise it would not have been wariness on his face. All those who would stand for Warlord or High Lord strode out, and without further ceremony shields began to be tossed as their feet. Troke and Hakram's supporters threw their shields quickly, already convinced, but most of the hall did not. A handful of other chiefs earned about thirty shields between them, but most clans were holding off to see what happened to the leading candidates.

That patience was rewarded when the Split Tree Clan and its seventeen closest allies walked right past Troke to throw their shields at Hakram's feet. They moved to stand with the alliance after, to roars of surprise in the hall. Hakram almost smiled, because suddenly the back of the hall that Troke had claimed and filled no longer looked like a solid wall of support. It looked a little empty while staying very, very visible. *Didn't I say I'd make you rue that trick?* The final counts were hard to be certain of, but Hakram trusted his eyes: seventy-two to eighty-one. Troke had received more support than expected but the gap had closed.

Now everyone in the hall knew that this ended with one of them the victor, so the real fight began.

Champions first. It was a roughly even trade of victories and defeats, with little unexpected save that Dag distinguished himself by winning thrice – though, unlike Skarod Longaxe, not in consecutive duels. The first few duels were without rancour, but by the seventh the tone had changed. Champions went for kills, not blood, and enmities were made. Without a clear victor in the violence, the fight was passed on and so Hakram stepped out of the crowd as Troke did. Armed, both of them, but it wouldn't begin with steel.

"Deadhand," Troke Snaketooth said, enunciating every syllable. "Pretty name. How did you get it again?"

"When I faced a hero and lived," Hakram replied. "Without a Name of my own."

"When you lost a hand to a hero," Troke said. "Only you've lost more than that since. How much orc is there left in you, Deadhand?"

It'd been a certainty the man would bring up the crippling, but Hakram still had to push down a grimace. He was past doubting himself over what he had lost, but his kind had poor opinions of the crippled. Having borne a Name – still having a Name, for those who did not understand the details and there would be many – made up for it some, as such things were forgiven in the renowned. Grem famously lacked an eye and was not held in contempt for it. But that was only an eye. Hakram had lost three limbs, nearly a quarter of his body was steel and bone.

Even among those who supported him, many faces agreed.

"All orc, where it matters," a woman's voice called out.

Hungry Gods, was that Sigvin? Whoever it'd been there was a gale of laughter as Troke bit down on a scowl. That was one way to disarm the line of argument, Hakram supposed.

"You like to talk about who I am," Hakram noted. "Who you are."

"Because I don't know you, Deadhand," Troke said. "Who here does? You boast you've fought in many wars, but what I hear is that you've fought for everyone but us."

Hakram snorted.

"Us, Troke?" he said. "Who's that? How many of the clans in this hall get to be called *us*?"

"We're orcs," Troke scoffed. "We get-"

"We're *nothing*," Hakram cut through.

Something like glee passed through Snaketooth's eyes as rumbles of anger passed through the hall. Troke kept silent, all the better to give Hakram enough rope to hang himself with. The tall orc cast a long look around, unmoved by the anger.

"You don't like hearing that?" he said. "Good, you shouldn't. It doesn't make it untrue."

He gestured around them.

"Look at us, huddling in a Soninke fortress arguing which Praesi city we should sack before we run back to the Steppes," Hakram scorned. "Half the armies on Calernia are fighting the greatest war this continent has ever seen and what does Troke Snaketooth offer you – *Nok*?"

He laughed, sharp and mocking.

"The least of the High Seats, and after the Ashurans already looted it," Hakram said. "For that privilege we're supposed to lick the Tower's hands like loyal hounds?"

"So you want us to lick Procer's arse instead," Troke said. "Is that what you're getting at? We ought to sign up with the Grand Alliance and go die for some fucking idiot princes in some nowhere out west? So much for the fucking War College."

Laughter and blades on shields. The War College was disliked by some, Procer by nearly all. Callow was respected, in a way, but the Principate? It was the decadent idiot of orc stories, the avatar of excess and cupidity. There was not a thimble of esteem for the Principate of Procer to be gathered in this entire hall.

"Procer's not my trouble," Hakram dismissed. "But this kind of talk, Troke? It's why I called us nothing."

The Snaketooth had a wary glint in his eye. Last time that utterance had not burned Hakram like the other orc had thought it would. The tall orc instead turned to the chiefs around them, the clans.

"In five hundred years, when they talk of the fall of Keter, the war to end all wars – what will they say of the orcs?" Hakram asked the hall. "Where will the Clans be in that story?"

He sneered.

"Knifing each other over a few dozen chest of loot while the real powers of Calernia carve the land up into great realms, the empires of the coming age. That's what it gets you, playing the Tower's game."

"So you want us to rebel, like Callow-"

"You talk more of Callow than I do, Troke," Hakram cuttingly replied. "Do you need a recommendation to enrol in its army?"

Hard laughter, not kind to the chieftain of the Blackspears. It put the man on the back foot long enough for Hakram to keep speaking.

"We became part of the Dread Empire of Praes because of the promises made under the Declaration," he said. "Do you think those promises were kept?"

Rumbles of approval.

"Well?" Hakram challenged. "*Do you?*"

Shouts, some harder to parse than others, but the screams of *NO* were clear.

"If the Praesi don't keep their end of the bargain, then why are we still on our knees?"

Blades on shields. Troke's face darkened. He was losing the hall and knew it.

"High Lord of the Steppes," Hakram scorned. "What a way to call burying your head in the sand. Troke offers you Nok and Malicia's blessing, do you want to know what *I* offer?"

*YES*, the assembly shouted.

"I give you Ater and all the Tower owes us," Hakram said.

A roar.

"I give you *Keter*, riches and glory for a hundred years," Hakram said.

The roar grew.

"And when we come home at last, we'll raise a city from the stones we took from theirs," Hakram Deadhand thundered. "One

great enough that even in a thousand years they will tremble at the return of our Horde!"

The roar drowned out everything, and as it rose something grew within Hakram. Sharpened, refined it. And, the tall orc thought as he met Troke Snaketooth's eyes, the same thing was weakening inside his rival. The tide was turning, and that meant there was only one way for Troke to win now. The chieftain of the Blackspears slowly unsheathed his sword as the roar finally died down.

"Castles in the sky," Troke Snaketooth bit out. "Their fall will kill us all. Answer for that, Deadhand, with a blade."

"If you champion nothing, Troke," Hakram replied as he took his axe in hand, "that is the sole prize you can win."

The other orc was quick. Quicker than he should be, even as tall as he was. There was an unnatural swiftness to his limbs, the kind that came from a claim settled into one's bones. Hakram was fresher to his own, but he knew Names in a way that Troke did not. The chieftain's slash found only steel as Hakram turned and let his arm take it, while he continued to pivot and swung at the man's head. Troke dropped below the blow before the arc had even begun and Hakram bared his teeth. He knew how to win. They broke and circled each other as feet stomped against stone and blades against shields, their steps careful until Hakram went on the offensive.

A wild chop, cutting down with the beginnings of Name strength, but Troke caught the haft of the axe with the side of his blade and withstood it. Hakram drew back and the chieftain's footing shifted as he gathered momentum, preparing for a throat that would go through Hakram's throat. But then the tall orc took a hand off his axe, his bone one, and slapped at the side of Troke's head. It was a blow that'd hurt but not kill. Catherine would have taken it and finished the thrust, Indrani would already be wrenching her swords of his eyes. But Troke had not yet learned to set aside the instincts of a Name, and so he went to block the slap with his sword instead of finishing the thrust. He'd begun to move before his mind could catch up to the choice.

And so Hakram caught the blade in his dead hand and smiled. He squeezed, steel grinding against bone with a horrid sound, and then the sword *broke*. Troke's eyes widened and he was pulling away, but the man found the head of Hakram's axe resting against the side of his neck. Someone let out a hoarse shout behind them. The Snaketooth's gaze did not waver.

"I knew it might end this way," Troke said, grinning ruefully. "But I was *hungry*, Deadhand."

He breathed out.

"No regrets. Finish it."

That was the way, wasn't it? The red, blood and rage and victory all in one. But he'd never had the red in his blood before, so why start? Hakram's axe drew back and he swung, Troke's eyes closing as the flat side of the axe head came to rest against his neck.

"It is finished," Hakram said.

The man's eyes opened in startled surprise.

"I have a use for you, Troke Snaketooth," the Warlord said.

All around them shields were cast down and orcs knelt. The shaman had not called for acclamation, but some things were beyond ceremony. Two hundred shields fell at his feet, as inevitable as the coming of dawn. It was done. The Warlord thought of a moonlit oath, then, and part of him felt like weeping.

But it was done, raised and buried.

## Interlude: West II

*"The easy wars are the ones where one side's right and the other's wrong. The terrible ones are where they're both right, because once they know that there's no wrong they'll flinch away from."*

– Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general

They were losing the war one victory at a time, Hanno thought.

There'd not been a defeat in Hainaut since the great battle that'd destroyed the principality, and still its defenders were losing the land. Hanno among them. Undaunted by a string of defeats in the fields, the Dead King had begun attacking with renewed vigour and it was working. The trouble was that while Hanno's army had been crushing the dead wherever they met, it could only be in one place. It could not both prevent the dead from reopening the tunnels at Malmedit and prevent them from breaking through at Juvelun, it could not both fight the army coming from Luciennerie out west and relive General Abigail from the latest siege at Lauzon's Hollow.

Hanno's army was spent and exhausted, ever victorious and ever smaller. And even worse was that they were no longer truly an effective shield. The Dead King had begun ignoring the defences in Hainaut and sending large flying constructs – named Pelicans, for their head resembled those of the birds – over the walls to disgorge warbands in Arans and Brabant, where they wreaked havoc before being slain. The Pelicans themselves avoided fighting,

however, and though Antigone had brought down several with storms and lightning more kept coming. General Abigail believed that soon Keter would begin landing mages the same way to create disrupting forces by slaying and raising villages.

The Fox's instincts were sharp enough that Hanno was not inclined to doubt them.

From what he heard, it was much the same to the west. Princess Rozala and her Named had pulled off a miracle just south of Peroulet but the defence line there had still failed for a time and it'd been costly to restore it. To the northwest, the Kingfisher Prince had smashed through every army on his way south to Brus while a sea of undeath nipped at his heels. Then to win his home some respite Frederic Goethal had turned back with half a dozen Named and his retinue to destroy a Crab, getting severely wounded. He would have gotten himself dead instead, had Otto Redcrown not ridden to his rescue and led their retreat through an avalanche. The love ballad about it was highly popular in camp.

Yet for all that the singing did the souls of soldiers good, it did not change the truth of things: the defences south of Cleves were teetering on the brink of collapse and those north of Brus would not hold when the tide came. Everywhere the war was being lost, and as was always the way when doom crept close men looked for someone to blame. The Army of Callow was the least harmful, simply insisting that if the Black Queen were there the dead would already be routed, but others were not so measured. The First Prince was cursed for weakness, Amadis Milenan men lost at the Battle of the Camps that might now turn the tide and the League of Free Cities for having made it all worse.

It was worse between Procerans. Lycaonese blamed feckless southerners, having lost half their princes and all their homes defending strangers they held in contempt, while Alamans cursed the Lycaonese for having drained their lands of men to defend the indefensible and Arlesites for being miserly in helping with the defence of the realm. As for the Arlesites, more and more they questioned their very presence in these parts. Why should they stand against nightmares when their own homes were yet untouched? Should they all die and leave their homeland undefended for when the storm came? Desertions would have been common if there was anywhere safer to flee to. Hanno had kept the army from coming anywhere near Neustal, knowing he'd lose hundreds to Julianne's Highway overnight should he approach the fortress.

Hanno had been giving hope where he could, though not always in manners comfortable to him. Too many called him Lord White, and some of the rumours from further south... He had pushed down the discomfort, it was a small price to pay for keeping the armies from despair. The Lycaonese captains he had supported when the



northerners had almost split over returning to their homelands had begun to look to him for orders, like the Brabantine levies, and even fantassins now sought his commands instead of Princess Beatrice Volignac's – she whose very lands they were fighting in. There was a time where Hanno would have taken a step back, after realizing he now led what was effectively the second largest military force left in Procer, but no more.

The Truce and Terms had been forged under an understanding: he and Catherine would see to the affairs of Named while Cordelia Hasenbach saw to the affairs of state. It was never to be a perfect arrangement, not when Catherine Foundling was also an influential ruler in her own right, but there had been a balance. All contribute, all held up their part. Only now the First Prince no longer did. Reinforcements were no longer coming, the flow of soldiers and supplies tapering off. Salia was not holding up its part of the bargain, the promise that mortal law could see the war prosecuted without need for Named to step in. So what reason was there for Hanno to step back?

He would not hide behind a broken bargain when his duty was clear.

And so he had spoken with Antigone, who had spoken in turn with the only father she remembered. Which led him to a cool morning, standing with only her at his side as in the distance the sun rose and a brisk wind twisted around them. In the distance smoke rose in curtains, Keter's armies ever making a hundred fresh devilries to unleash, but here on the hills the only thing to mar the green grass was soft dew. Greenery and water shivered both as the Witch of the Woods finished the last of her spell, clouds high above dispersing as if they'd been swatted through. A weight settled on the world, dew turning to mist as the grass began to twist and grow.

In the rising mists stood a giant out of the old stories. Bronze-skinned like others of his kind, but none of the Gigantes would ever dare to claim kinship with Kreios Maker-of-Riddles. It would have been absurd, in their eyes, as a fly claiming kinship to a hawk. The Titanomachy kept to no king, but that was only because it kept to something simpler: a god. There had been many, once, but now only one still lived. Crippled, left a shadow of himself. And yet Hanno knew without a doubt that even the spell-shadow now staring down at him could snuff his existence out with a thought. The ancient Titans, the founders of the Titanomachy, had done a great many arrogant things.

Calling themselves gods had not been one of them.

"Antigone."

The voice was fond, thick with affection. Hanno's comrade shifted, head dipping down and to the side to show both love and

reverence. What had led Antigone to be raised by the Titan he did not know, much less what had convinced the ancient creature to teach her of the powers of the Gigantes, but their closeness had been evident from the first time he'd seen them. The Riddle-Maker had no such fondness for him, however, and the gaze was not so kind when turned to Hanno.

"White Knight."

"Lord Titan," Hanno replied, simply dipping his head.

Reverence but not love. Insincerity in the language of the Gigantes was seen as highly offensive. Worse than an insult, which at least was clearly conveyed.

"I am told you would make a request."

He straightened.

"I would," Hanno said. "This war, Lord Kreios, is one we are losing."

"So it is."

The indifference was plain to hear. The Riddle-Maker did not involve himself much in the affairs of his own descendants, much less these of humans. To that pale and patient gaze, they were like mayflies: come and gone in a moment. What did petty wars matter to the last of the Titans?

"It will not be like the others," Hanno said. "The Intercessor has meddled. Should it be lost, there will be consequences."

The Titan's gaze was cold.

"To you."

"You are wrong, Lord," Hanno replied. "If this were a crusade, perhaps, but this war is not that. The east came as well, and now the south rises. The world stirs. *This war will not be like the others.*"

Consideration.

"The Young King no longer withholds strength."

A concession.

"Your request?"

Hanno breathed in. Many a time he had thought of what he might say, of what words might sway an entity that had known more years he had known breaths. A hundred speeches he had crafted and discarded, only to admit the truth to himself: there were no

words that would do it. Convince the Riddle-Maker should he not wish to be convinced. All he could do was ask and hope.

*"Fight,"* Hanno of Arwad said, and the word rang of power. "Stand with Calernia, with life and hope. Stand with us and fight."

Silence.

"All things pass," Kreios Maker-of-Riddles said. "You and he alike. Fate cannot be gainsaid or turned back: what must be will be."

"Apathy?" Hanno replied. "Is that your answer, last of the Titans? Is that the wisdom your many years have to offer us?"

He glared, defiant.

"I see no wisdom in this," he said. "Only weariness, and what worth is that? Who in this world is not weary, Riddle-Maker?"

"There is no word in any tongue your mind can comprehend," the Titan said, "that would touch a sliver of what true weariness is. How could you? You grope at a speck of dust in the face of eternity and call it an *end*. You are not even a beginning, child. You are the dust of dust."

"Then what holds you back?" Hanno challenged. "If none of it matters, if we are but dust, what stays your hand?"

The dark-skinned man raised his chin, glaring up at the shape in the mist.

"Retreat from the world all you like, it does not retreat from you," Hanno said. "It will knock at your door, Maker-of-Riddles. It may be that you would weather our destruction, but would the Titanomachy?"

"All things pass," the Riddle-Maker simply said.

Hanno scornfully laughed.

"It may be that you are worse than the elves," he said. "Even they, in the face of oblivion, can muster more than a *shrug*."

That, at last, earned a reaction.

"If you knew the truth of your insult, you would swallow your tongue," the Titan said. "What the Dawning King schemes is abomination. Parcelling godhead into children, forcing a spring rightfully denied."

"And this shines kindness on you?" Hanno coldly said. "What a prize to claim, that your apathy is less a curse on Calernia than abomination."

"Your fight means nothing," the Titan said.

"He's right," Antigone said.

Silence. Surprise.

"Antigone?"

"We don't deserve saving," the Witch of the Woods said. "It's still true, what you told me when I was a child: we are petty creatures, humans. Most of us are not worth the saving."

The last of the Titans watched the woman he had raised, wearing her face of painted clay, and said nothing.

"But it's not about us," Antigone said. "It's about you."

She moved her head to the side, tilted it back. Grief, question.

"You stand at the crossroads again," Antigone said. "Do you want to be the seven or the one?"

Hanno's eyes narrowed. He had known that pattern to be older than most suspected, but whatever ancient lore she was speaking of was beyond even the reach of Recall. The Riddle-Maker's pale eyes stayed on the woman he'd raised, silence stretching, and suddenly the pressure vanished. The mist dispersed and the wind began to blow again. The spell-shadow of Kreios was gone.

"Will he come?" Hanno asked.

Antigone's shoulders were tense. *I don't know*, she signed. Hanno of Arwad ruefully smiled, looking up at the sky. This morning the answer had been a no, he thought.

It was a small step forward, but still a step.

—

It was Lyonis that had done it, Cordelia decided.

On the great map at the heart of the Vogue Archive, the grey of death had spread. Bremen and Neustria were both lost to the dead and already the norther border of Brus was being tested. Once the generals of the Dead King had found paths through the swamps, once the thousands of Lycaonese slain were armed and assembled into battalions, the push into Brus would begin and the death knell of Procer would ring. And yet those news had not resonated strongly, down south – only Lycaonese principalities had fallen and Cordelia's homeland was barely considered part of the Principate in some parts.

It was when the dead had smashed through the last few strongholds in Cleves and toppled the hastily raised defences in northern

Lyonis that the panic had begun to spread. Princess Rozala had done the impossible – won three battles in three days with the same army across a breadth of sixty miles – and broken the enemy offensive before restoring the defences, but some had still slipped through. For the first time since the war had begun, bands of undead had made into Lyonis. One had even made it as far south as the border of Salia before being ridden down.

Despite Cordelia's best efforts to maintain the calm, planting rumours it'd been bandits instead, panic had spread like a disease in every direction. The people of the Principate were being confronted with the fallibility of the realm they'd been under all their lives, the thought finally occurring that this wasn't simply another crisis: Procer would be annihilated if it lost and it was undeniably losing the war.

Riots had been only to be expected. In Salia at least Cordelia had been able to put down largely without blood using the alchemical compound the Concocter had sold the Assembly the recipe to. Elsewhere the rioting had been put down violently if it had been put down at all. Entire swaths of Iserre were now in revolt against both Cordelia and their own prince while the ports of eastern Creusens had seized grain barges meant for further north before beginning to turn away all ships. That was not the worst of it, of course. This very morning her spymaster Louis de Sartrons had brought news of a smaller but more personal grief.

Princess Francesca, her friend and ally of almost a decade, was dead. Her palace had been swarmed by a mob of rioters and disaffected soldiers, who'd dragged the sixty-four years old princess into the streets and splattered her head with a rock before displaying her on a pole. It had happened, Cordelia was told, because Francesca had refused to consider what her distant cousin and successor proclaimed within the hour: Tenerife was seceding from the Principate of Procer. Envoys were being sent, Louis had told her, to Empress Basilia of Aenia and the League of Free Cities. Tenerife was leaving a sinking boat in favour of the protection that might be offered by a rising one.

The principality of Orense had followed suit within the week, deposing its distant prince still fighting under Princess Rozala and installing his youngest daughter in his stead, a thirteen-year-old girl who signed whatever the rebel leaders put in front of her to avoid having her throat cut and her ten-year-old brother shoved into the seat instead. Those were the open rebellions, but there were those more discreet.

Cordelia's steadfast ally Prince Renato of Salamans had regretfully informed her he would no longer be able to send food and men north. If he did, he would lose this throne within the month. Prince Salazar of Valencis had done the same thing but less honestly, speaking instead of 'unforeseen delays' in sending

both. Cordelia's authority strengthened the further north one went, it could be said, but even there it was thinning. Orne, Cantal and Creusens now refused refugees at their borders no matter what was ordered. The only principalities that still obeyed Cordelia were those who felt the Dead King looming over them and even that rule was not ironclad.

Panic was making men do foolish things. Prince Ariel of Arans, spooked by the growing incursions of the dead into his lands, was trying to approach Callow for protection again – and willing to go under Laure for it, should that be the price. Cordelia was more amused than offended, knowing that neither Queen Catherine nor Princess Vivienne would be remotely interested and that Duchess Kegan, the regent in the capital, was of the opinion that everything east of the Parish should be left to burn. Worse than that was the talk in Brabant, where civil unrest had been placated only by the ruling princess abdicating and promising the offer the crown to the man the people saw as their salvation: Hanno of Arwad, the White Knight.

Cordelia's agents had told her when the Brabant levies had begun to call the man 'Lord White' but, now that the sentiment was spreading through their homeland, she was facing the very real prospect of *Prince White*. The First Prince was not sure she had the votes to prevent confirmation of such a title by the Highest Assembly if the matter came before them. It was a sign of the times. Salia's authority was weakening and now a hundred petty kings were emerging from the cracks on a once-great realm. And yet what could she do? So very little, when it came down to it, but that was no excuse for inaction and apathy.

Cordelia Hasenbach would not stand before the Heavens having known idle hands while the Principate of Procer burned down around her.

And today she would be laying eyes on one of the ways she might yet stem the tide. The weapon had been moved out of Aisne, which was now too close to for her tastes, and brought to Salia itself. Outside the city proper, requiring an hour's ride there and back, but Cordelia would make the time to look at the angel's corpse with her own eyes regardless. The test done in Aisne had made it necessary: if the First Prince was to use such a weapon, she would first gaze upon it. It was the last of what was owed. The man she'd chosen to oversee the matter awaited her at the edge of the grounds, mounted as well, as Cordelia allowed herself a genuine smile: even in these circumstances, it was a pleasure to see Simon de Gorgeault again.

"Your Most Serene Highness," the older man said.

"Simon," she warmly replied.

She had not forgotten his actions during Balthazar's attempted coup, or his loyal service since as her Lord Inquisitor. He'd put down the title to serve here instead, but it had taken little urging. They both knew that spending time curtailing the House of Light now be much like closing the blinds on a home aflame. Besides, she had needed someone she could trust to handle this. He led her through the small houses where the priests and soldiers lived and to the temple that had been chosen to host the corpse. Larger than such a temple out in the countryside should be, for it hosted the tomb of some distant Merovins, but not a structure of great beauty: it was all worn pale stone and tall angular ceilings.

Once windows of tainted glass would have added some charm, but over the years some had been broken and replaced by simple green glass. Yet the temple was large enough and it was placed far from prying eyes, which was what had been required.

"I would advise that you gather yourself before entering, Your Highness," Simon said after they dismounted. "It is... an experience."

Cordelia silently nodded, eyes going down to her palm. She could faintly feel the burn of laurels against it, a pale echo of the searing pain she had felt the night she caught the coin of the Sword of Judgement. Simon de Gorgeault led the way into the temple, guards closing the gates behind them, and silence washed over Cordelia. It was as if the air had turned to water, and though she gulped down breaths she found her heart going wild. Simon's cheeks were flushed but he seemed otherwise unaffected, perhaps from practice. Cordelia eventually gathered her bearings, smoothing down her dress and proceeding further into the temple.

There must have been rooms and halls she walked through, but she could barely see any of them. The slipped through her mind as if it were oily fingers. All that the First Prince recalled was movement, and then she stood before it. The weapon. The ealamal. It felt like the bones of a grand creature, curving along the ceiling, but there was nothing natural in this: wings of burnished copper spread wide, touching... something. A spine, Cordelia's mind insisted, but it was not of bone. Her eyes shied away from it and what she could glimpse seemed like stone sometimes, though impossibly small compared to the burning wings of copper, and yet at others it seemed like translucent spike of swirling colours. Her eyes watered from trying to look at it.

"Only priests capable of wielding Light can look directly at it, Your Highness," Simon said.

"The wings seem as though they might be simply copper, but the... spine," Cordelia quietly said. "That is not of Creation."

"You have not looked long as the wings, then," Simon said. "That is for the best. I have known shallower seas."

Cordelia shivered.

"But it worked, when used?" she asked.

"It is as an amplifier for Light, and something more too," Simon agreed. "It carries something of the Choir of Judgement within itself and spreads it wherever it goes. It would incinerate undead and devils it touches, certainly, but beyond that the matter grows complicated."

"It did not kill anyone who could use Light," Cordelia said.

"But it killed soldiers as well as the criminals, Your Highness," Simon said. "Not all of them, but many. Should a wave of such power pass over Procer, hundreds of thousands will almost certainly die."

Judgement was strict and not inclined to mercy when doling out punishment. The weapon, when used, seemed to mimic the harsh attentions of that Choir. And people were only people, with all the frailties and wickedness that implied. Should the weapon be used on a large scale, many thousands would be slain. But not all of the Principate, Cordelia thought. Many, too many, but not *all*. And even should Catherine's worst predictions come true and the Intercessor seek to influence such a weapon – which should not be possible, with Judgement silenced by the Hierarch's spirit – to spread over all of Calernia, it would not represent annihilation. Some would survive. It would be a monstrous order to give and a horrifying outcome, the First Prince would not pretend otherwise.

It would still be preferable to letting the Dead King kill every living thing on the continent.

"Have it prepared for use," Cordelia rasped out.

The former head of the Holy Society stiffened.

"I have misgivings, Your Highness," Simon said. "I understand your instinct: it will take months of priests pouring Light to make of the corpse something that would give the Dead King pause. Yet such power, when gathered, has a way of demanding use."

"In five months, the Principate will collapse," the First Prince of Procer said.

The older man paused.

"We have too many refugees, Simon, and not enough fields," she said. "I have been staving off the end by buying every scrap of grain I can borrow and beg, but the point of no return has come



and gone. We have too many refugees and not enough fields, we are no longer sustainable.”

“Can Keter not be toppled?” the older man asked.

“Undead will be at the gates of Salia by the time our armies encamp below the walls of the Crown of the Dead,” Cordelia said. “I expect by then the south will have effectively seceded anyhow. I have ensured our armies will have supplies to carry on that last strike, but I can do no more than that.”

“Can the Chosen not turn the tide?” Simon asked, almost plaintively.

“The Chosen,” Cordelia hissed, “are the backbone of our defeat. How much time did we spend wrestling them into order as again and again they threatened the foundations of the alliances keeping us alive? The Damned might be a pack of rapacious killers, but they never gave us half the trouble the *Chosen of the Heavens* did. The Red Axe, the Mirror Knight, even the White Knight himself.”

She clenched her fists.

“I was promised that the Named would be seen to, but in this only the Black Queen kept her word,” Cordelia Hasenbach harshly said. “The White Knight failed utterly in this, and I will not now rely on him when the fate of every living soul in Calernia rests in the balance.”

She stared down Simon of Gorgeault.

“Have it prepared for us,” the First Prince repeated, and this time the ring of an order was unmistakable.

The laurels burned against her palm, but Cordelia did not flinch. She would do what she must so keep the west in the war until the last moment. And should it stumble, should it fail?

She would, again, do what she must.

## **Interlude: East III**

*“Red runs the Tower’s mortar.”*

– Praesi saying

Within an hour of entering Ater, Akua Sahelian was sought out for a conspiracy to overthrow the Empress. By the end of the day, no fewer than seventeen such offers had been made to her.

“It is all very tasteless,” she mused. “A defeat against an invading enemy – Callowan, too, how classical – paired with a great gathering of nobles at the imperial court, everyone

scheming to overthrow the Tower and a vague sense of doom looming over all these proceedings. One would be forgiven for thinking they'd stumbled into a tragedy written now by Adomako. Any moment now we will stumble into a scene of overdone symbolism."

The golden-eyed sorceress paused.

"A wounded gazelle being fought over by lions," Akua decided. "It's always lions, isn't it? There is an excessive fondness in our writing for the beasts, Kendi, given their general uselessness."

"You are mad," Kendi Akaze harshly replied. "And not even in the way fools honour. Do not think I will not sell you out to the Tower at the first opportunity."

Perhaps it was the presence of the Amaranth around her neck, the way the ancient artefact drowned out all the pettier emotions, but Akua had found herself growing fond of the man. He was remarkably straightforward in his hatred of her, and though he had not attempted to kill her since their mage duel in Kala she suspected it was only a matter of time until he tried again. She did not blame him for this, or feel particularly offended. She had led the man's sister and several of his kin to their death at the Folly they named after her, and that was a better reason for hatred than most.

"I expect several of the nobles who approached me for treachery did so on Malicia's behalf," Akua amusedly replied. "Not that my having committed to nothing will soothe her fear of me in the slightest."

"And why should she not fear you?" Kendi said. "All the world knows you seek her throne."

"Naturally," Akua agreed, draining the last of her cup.

She had lost the habit of pairing wine with antidote. The taste was no longer familiar to her, after drinking from other bottles. Her fondness of it had thinned. Her fondness of many things had thinned, the sorceress thought, and rose to her feet.

"Let us be off, Kendi," Akua said. "There is time to be wasted and I would waste it elsewhere."

Out in the City of Gates, not these luxurious apartments that felt like they were closing in on her from every direction. Like a noose slowly tightening. Kendi made an unpleasant comment about her intellect, charmer that he was, but he followed. He always followed.

How else, Akua thought, could he find the moment to stick the knife?

They went into the streets of the capital, followed by a horde of shadows. Spies belonging to three dozen different lords and the Eyes, soldiers, Sentinels and two – no, three assassins. Really, an illusionary veil? Akua had first made her reputation bleeding *fae*, this was insulting. She informed the man as much after melting off his limbs in a cloud of acid before turning to ask her other would-be assassins to try it again tomorrow, for she was not in the mood for sport today. Her shielding spells came up quicker than the arrow came down, so a few blood-curling screams later the last remaining assassin fled.

"Someone will succeed," Kendi told her. "Sooner or later, you will fail."

"I can always count on you for perspective," she replied, patting his arm fondly.

He looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, which put her in a good enough mood to make up for the sloppy assassination attempts. Even the Jacks would have done better, and they'd only been around for a few years on top of being led by a whiny heroine. Akua found, as she walked the streets, that Ater was a pot about to boil over. The capital had swelled with refugees not only from Nok and the outskirts of Thalassina but now also the swaths of the Wasteland that'd been ravaged by the civil war. It was said that the City of Gates held half a million people within its walls, but she knew that to be inaccurate – it was usually closer to three hundred thousand, only growing when famine struck other parts of Praes.

At the moment, though, she suspected that there truly might be five hundred thousand people in the city. A disastrous number to try to keep fed during a siege, no matter how full the Tower's granaries, and the city was poorly equipped to host them besides. Large swaths of the capital were abandoned, and though it was better than living in the streets making a home in those districts was barely livable. District mages would keep the sewers working, the wards in good state and keep an eye out for epidemics but wouldn't really go out of their way to help beyond that. There were only so many of them and the city was enormous.

It'd once been custom for wealthy nobles to patronize sections of the city, but Malicia had stamped out the habit to consolidate her control over the capital. Would she reconsider now? Unlikely, Akua decided. The situation was too volatile for the empress to be willing to take on such a risk. Her wanderings through the half-ruined streets were noticed not only by spies and soldiers but also by the refugees themselves: someone must have recognized her, for a crowd began to gather. And, as crowds were wont to be, it grew angry. At first she wondered if she would have to retreat under shield spell as a mob tried to tear her apart, but then

laughter choked up her throat as she made out what was being shouted.

"Down the Tower," the crowd shouted.

"Death to Malicia," the crowd insisted.

And, worst of all-

"Warlock, Lady Warlock," they shouted. "*Sahelian. Save us, Sahelian.*"

*Save us, Sahelian*, Akua dully repeated. Had anyone ever spoken more absurd a sentence? It would have been the work of a moment to whip these dirty, desperate people into a raging mob. The fear was thick here, the Black Queen's name on half the lips. The Queen of Callow would come and kill them all, they said, like she'd done to the refugees that'd tried to cross into the Fields of Streges. She was here to bury the Empire, bury them with it, and it was all Malicia's fault. *Five years ago you would have rioted at anyone trying to overthrow her*, Akua thought. How quickly gratitude faded in the City of Gates.

"They'll turn on you too," Kendi said from behind her. "Tear out your throat like animals. It won't last."

It would have been so easy, to whip them into a frenzy and send them rioting into the streets. To sow the seeds of a chaos only she could calm and through that, oh through that she would rise. Climb the Tower until there was nothing left above, no one worth bowing to. So Akua climbed a broken house, a sea of people gathered before her, and told them the truth.

"The Black Queen will not kill civilians," she said. "The Army of Callow quarrels only with the Tower. Stay indoors, stay out of the way, and you will be safe."

It was not what they'd wanted to hear, she thought, as a rippled went through the crowd. They'd wanted blood, wanted death, wanted something to sink their teeth into. It was easier than going back to their hovels, afraid and cold. So she gave them something more.

"I have nothing left but my magic to offer you," Akua said, "but that much I will give you. Bring your wounded, your sick. I will see to them."

Something more than fear and cold. The first few were children – broken limbs, coughs, lungrot – but by the time she was done with them already people had begun to act. To organize. A run-down mansion that was clean and dry was opened to her, beds dragged into the great hall and what clean linen there could be rustled up volunteered. Strangers did this who had not known each other

for an hour, with a smoothness that surprised. *Jino-waza*. A few hedge mages came forward and she taught them a spell to boil water and conjure clean water before continuing with the work. They came in as a trickle, already a line running outside for half the district and kept in order by large men with makeshift cudgels, but the trickle never slowed.

Akua's magic did not tire. Fingers reattached, infections burned out, broken bones soldered. Cuts closed, parasites flushed out, nerves regrown. She had done this all many a time, after the Army of Callow saw battle. With Night instead of sorcery, but she was only better for the change. She was not sure how long she healed, the faces and people blending, but eventually she found she was drenched in sweat. The Amaranth kept getting caught in the red silk collar, so she set it down to the side and returned to the work. Immediately the heat washed over her, from the fire and the people and the Wasteland's pounding sun, but she mastered herself. A man was ushered in with his young daughter.

She had a fever, which Akua's finding spell told her was from an infection in the stomach. It would be more tedious than difficult to heal, which she informed them of. The man – a tall, heavy sort with soldier's scar – looked heartbreakingly relieved.

"I knew you'd come through, Lady Sahelian," he said as she began the spell. "You've always done right by us."

Curious, she spared the man a glance.

"I mean no rudeness," she began, and he snorted.

"I was only a soldier," he said. "But I served under you at First Liesse. Would have at the Second too, if my wife hadn't gotten pregnant with my youngest. The name's Kamau."

There was, to her dim horror, open pride in his voice at having served her. *How desperate must you be, that the memory of my follies is the raft you now cling to?*

"I was never disappointed by any of those I led into Liesse," Akua said, uneasy at the lie.

At feeling the need to tell it.

"It's been hard times since," Kamau admitted. "What with your lord cousin taking over in Wolof, some of us were sent away. We tried to head south, but it... didn't go well."

"The Green Stretch turned you back?" she asked.

"No, not them," the man said. "Callowans on the other side of the Wasaliti. Just farmers, at first, but then the Legions – the Army

of Callow, I guess they call themselves out west – got bloody too.”

He grimaced.

“We lost my wife fleeing back to the Blessed Isle,” he admitted. “It’s only this one and my son now. I have no words for how grateful I am you’re helping her.”

His eyes turned harsh.

“Would that you’d killed them all at the Doom, Lady Warlock,” he said. “We’d be better off for it. Next time, yeah?”

Her throat tightened, the magic flowing from her palm into the girls’ belly almost wavered. *I used you*, she almost told the man. *I used you all, until you were spent and dead and when you were I never looked back. Can you not see that? Can you not see that soldiers swung the swords but I own every death?*

“It was a bitter day for all who knew it,” Akua croaked, lips gone dry.

“Been a lot of those since you started the wars – I hear the scholars call them the Uncivil Wars,” Kamau said, but suddenly paled. “Not that I meant this was your fault at all, Lady Warlock, I-”

*Could not possibly speak a sentence more damning than that one*, Akua thought. But she painted a smile on her face, moved the lips and soothed his fear.

“Need not explain anything,” Akua said, then withdrew her hand from the girl. “It is done, dear. Be careful to drink only water until tomorrow, and don’t eat anything even if you get hungry. Your stomach is very sensitive, you’ll spew it right back up and it would hurt you.”

The little girl gravely nodded, and her father led her out after another round of apologies that she dismissed. Akua felt faint, as she next man was ushered in. How many of the people she had healed today were in the capital because of an action she had taken? Her folly had been used as the pretext for the Grand Alliance to go to war, for Ashur to ravage the coasts of the Empire, but there were faults closer to home. It was her banner raised that had begun the civil wars that were still raging across Praes, her schemes that had... Akua laid a hand against the wall, dizzy. She felt Kendi’s eyes on her, considering.

Forcing herself not to move with unseemly haste, she put the Amaranth back on and let the ancient grief of the crystallized tear wipe away the knots in her stomach. She returned to the work, learning from men as she did that the High Lady of Kahtan

had sent mages do imitate her and now dozens and dozens of highborn were doing the same. When finally she tired, her magic grown sluggish, she told the people as much. Some refugees wept as she went, but more cheered and even more bowed. It sickened her. She turned to the Taghreb woman who had first thought of using the mansion, had risen through the crisis as a leader of sorts.

"I am using you, you know," Akua said. "To raise my reputation."

It was true, she thought. It must be true. It was one thing to spare a man, a forgivable whim, but this... she had purpose, reason. She had taken an opportunity offered. The other woman shrugged.

"Maybe," she said. "But what does that matter, to the people you healed?"

Akua flinched away from her, from it all, but she was not to be allowed to retreat in peace.

"That was reckless," Kendi said. "She could have turned on you, told the crowd. You just came close to dying."

"I am always but a moment away from dying," Akua replied, forcing nonchalance.

The dark-skinned man rolled his eyes.

"Yes, *mile thaman Sahelian*, lovely," Kendi said, "but I don't mean philosophy-"

"Neither do I," Akua curtly interrupted. "Do you think my return to flesh came without a price? Somewhere in me lies a way for the Empress to kill me with a word. I do not speak in *metaphor*, Kendi, when I say I am only ever a moment away from death."

That silenced him, though she was not sure whether the quiet was thoughtful or surprised. No doubt he would soon begin to consider how the Empress might be incited to put her life to an end. Tired of it all, Akua moved towards the centre of the city. The Black Knight, at least, could be relied on for cold company. Marshal Nim was not the Legion headquarters of the capital but instead at her own manse, which Akua promptly headed to. That the servants allowed her and Kendi to enter was a surprise, but not so much of one as the fact that Nim was very obviously drunk. As mfuasa were trained to Kendi went to a corner just out of sight, where he could easily be forgotten, but his gaze missed nothing.

"Marshal," Akua greeted the ogre. "It appears you have me at something of a disadvantage, drink-wise. Will you not offer me your hospitality?"

Only the Black Knight did not stare her down coldly, call her a snake or sent her away. Instead, to Akua's dismay, the ogre twitched and then wordlessly gesture for her to sit. Most chairs here were built with ogres in mind, and the bottles on the table were closer to a barrel than what the sorceress would have meant by the term, but Akua found a carafe of terrible Aksum gold and a glass that was not larger than her head. She took a sip, then grimaced.

"This vintage is a war crime," Akua noted, "and I should know."

Marshal Nim stirred, as did the golden-eyed mage's hopes, but they were just as swiftly dashed.

"You were right," the Black Knight said.

"As is only natural," she replied, hiding her alarm.

"Malicia doesn't trust the Legions as far as she can throw them," the Black Knight said. "I am to share command of the defences with the High Lady of Kahtan."

Who commanded the largest of the highborn armies come to reinforce Ater as well as the largest coalition of nobles not under Malicia's thumb. In olden days that would have made High Lady Takisha the Chancellor, but nowadays it mostly meant that the Empress was scheming to kill and discredit her.

"I can't even blame her, after Kala," the Black Knight cursed. "They deserted, Sahelian. *Deserted!*"

A bottle of wine hit the wall, shattering with enough glass spraying everywhere that it would need wheelbarrow to clean up. Akua eyed the other woman clinically. Nim was drunk, obviously, but more than that she was despairing. Not only had she been decisively beaten by Marshal Juniper on the field – which must have stung, considering the Hellhound had not been all that highly thought of among the upper ranks of the Legions – but in the wake of that defeat almost a third of her army had deserted rather than fight. Now she had only her last loyalists and the skeleton legions that'd been left in the capital, a force weaker than the one Marshal Juniper had already beaten.

The Legions of Terror she had been fighting to preserve were effectively dead. The soldiers that'd walked off the field at Kala would not be returning to anyone's banner any time soon and the Tower would not forget or forgive that desertion – no matter how earned it had been. Even the legionaries who had stayed would be asking themselves why they were still fighting for the madwoman in the Tower that'd turned two thirds of the continent against them. *Her Role was broken at Kala*, Akua decided. *She failed in the central conceit of it, which was 'the general of*



*the Empire's armies'. She must either find a different Role or lose her Name.*

And Akua, who had tried to save her life and helped at every turn, was here in her moment of weakness. *I could promise you the Legions you want and mean it*, Akua thought, *and for that you'd follow me*. It was the right place, the right time, with the right history behind it. The Gods Below were offering a Black Knight of her own on a silver platter. All it would take was making promises that Akua genuinely believed would be in the interest of the Empire: the Legions had become one of the pillars of Praes since the Reforms, they were well-worth preserving and kept separate from politics exactly the way Marshal Nim wanted them to be.

All it would take was for Akua to speak sweet nothings with a silver tongue.

"You are a fool."

Oh dear, that'd been her speaking hadn't it? No matter, she could still salvage this.

"Are you truly so weak-willed, Black Knight?"

Not only was this distinctly not a sweet nothing, Akua thought, but it was arguably the opposite. An insulting something? She drank a bit more war crime to wash down the taste of whatever madness had seized her. Nim was shaken out of her daze by the insults, at least, which was a form of progress. Towards nothing pleasant, but progress anyhow.

"Even if I smash your head in for that, I'll still be dead before the month is out," the Black Knight said. "I know what a pattern of three is, Sahelian. I have won once and since suffered a draw. That boy will have my head soon enough."

"Then find a way to lose on your terms," Akua harshly replied. "Are you a Marshal of Praes or a maudlin child? Defeat need not mean death. Even Fate can be gamed. As for your precious Legions, what did you expect?"

"That they would stand behind their Black Knight," Nim roared.

"They did," Akua calmly replied. "You are not him."

That cut deep, she saw, but she was not done.

"Did you think this would be easy, Nim?" she mocked. "That you would earn a Name to pluck ripe peaches from the tree? *You are villain.*"

She threw her own glass against the wall. It shattered most satisfyingly.

"You are the Black Knight of Praes," Akua hissed. "Have some *fucking pride*. You lost and your ideal is in tatters, what of it? Do you think a hundred of your Name have not stood where you do, all ashes in their hands and blood in their mouth?"

"It can't be salvaged," the Black Knight replied, eyes wild. "We all saw-"

"Then raise it again from the ground up," Akua cut in harshly. "Or are you so enamoured with being the lesser of your predecessor that you can not do the same he did? This was never going to be *handed* to you, and it offends me that for even a breath you thought it might be. You are Named to struggle, to rise above what you were. If you cannot tolerate the way of the world, then *change it*."

Marshal Nim rocked back.

"I – you," she stumbled. "What is this, Sahelian?"

"A disappointment," Akua scathingly said. "I thought better of you, Marshal. A petty idealist you might have been, but you did not lack for spine. The Hellhound did not take it from you on the field, so where was it mislaid?"

Nim looked as lost as she was drunk.

"I thought you would," she said, hesitated.

Make an offer, she did not say.

"What are you, that I should?" Akua said, rising to her feet. "Naught but a broken thing which knows not what it wants or what it seeks. You have no design, no fire, not even a plan. You call yourself Named but you are a dandelion, a victim of wind and whims."

She was panting, by the end of that. And wondering if it was the Black Knight she was castigating.

"Stand on your own feet, Black Knight," Akua Sahelian said. "What use could anyone have for you before you do?"

And so she rose to hers, dizzy. And looking at Nim's face she felt like cursing, like weeping, like screaming at the top of her lungs. Because when she had walked into this room the Black Knight had been a woman who might have made a deal with her, but now she looked at Akua like someone who wanted to follow her. Like ragged Kauma in the ragged mansion, handed scraps of a fate and yet so odiously grateful. Did she need to set fire to the city, before someone at last screamed enough? Akua fled.

"She will know what you are in time," Kendi said. "And hate what she sees then."

"She should *already* hate me," Akua bit out.

By the time they got back to her manse it was dark, and so the highborn came out to play. The ones that had approached her during the day were fools and amateurs, but those who fully intended to see the Empress usurped now came crawling out of the gutters. The invitation she received was not signed, but that was the way of such conspiracies. She put on a cloak and returned to the streets, Kendi following dutifully, to see what the conspirators had to offer. One could not topple the Tower without the support of powerful backers. The heavily warded manse she was led to by a guide was dark, and she was brought to a room where twelve sat masked at a great table.

Amused, she stared down the woman at the head of the table.

"You are sitting in my seat," Akua said.

There was a ripple. Laughter, offence, some just surprised by her gall. Kendi disappeared into a dark corner, already forgotten by almost everyone in the room.

"That remains to be seen," an indistinct voice replied through the mask.

"Does it now?" Akua mused.

It had been hours since she used magic. She was still exhausted, but her disdain for this farce lent her strength. Power billowed out tearing through the anchored illusion forcing shadows and then, obeying her will, cutting cleanly. One after another, twelve masks dropped. Some were hastily caught, but not enough.

"High Lady Takisha," Akua noted, locking eyes with the woman at the head of the table. "How bold."

"I'll have to kill you for this," the High Lady of Kahtan coldly said.

She laughed, scornfully, in the woman's face.

"Ah yes, so that instead these fine conspirators might instead support *your* bid for the Tower," Akua said, running a finger across the table. "No doubt you gathered this little event because you were able to climb it on your own. You are known as a woman highly lacking in ambition."

A moment of silence.

"She has you there, Muraqib" a masked man carelessly said.

"Without my support and that of my vassals, you have no chance of success," High Lady Takisha evenly said. "This will have a price. First comes the restoration of the Name of —"

"No," Akua said.

Startled surprise. This was not, the sorceress knew, how this conversation was meant to go.

"Pardon?" High Lady Takisha said.

Akua was so very tired of this, she realized. Of the cloak and dagger plots, of the pit of hatred and betrayal that was the Tower. Of this empire of endless teeth, guzzling down its own people not to achieve anything but for the mere purpose of continuing to exist. And they were part of it, too, these masked fools before her. Teeth in the maw.

"You do not make demands of me," Akua said, and it felt *good*.

"You are mistaken if-"

"Who are you, Takisha Muraqib, that I should take heed of you?" Akua asked, honestly meaning the question. "All I see is the last rat standing. What have you won, what have you done, that your displeasure should give me pause?"

"Hard talk, coming from the Black Queen's concubine," a man bit out.

"I would have more power as Catherine Foundling's bedwarmer than you ever have or ever will wield," the golden-eyed aristocrat laughed in his face. "That's why you're here, all of you, in this room instead of halfway across the city plotting to back someone else."

She swept the room with her gaze.

"So let us dispose of the pretence that you are owed for this conversation, that this is a favour done onto me," Akua said. "You are vultures circling a wounded lion but too afraid to take the plunge. I need you?"

She moved her lips into a smile.

"You need me," Akua corrected, "and you, High Lady Takisha, are *still sitting in my seat*."

Silence stretched out, and something like relief welled up. At last, she thought, the end. They would balk and turn on her, Malicia would end it and- and Takisha Muraqib, hatred in her eyes, rose to her feet. *No*, Akua thought. *No. How can you not seen that I have nothing to threaten you with, no one behind me? You are a High Lady of Praes, the sharpest of irons, so why are snatching defeat from the jaws of victory? Why, you misbegotten Hellgods, do I keep winning?* Appalled, Akua Sahelian took her seat at the head of a table where twelve of the most powerful lords and ladies of Praes sat.

"They measure your back for knives already," Kendi told her as they left. "You will not be forgiven for this."

"Then why," Akua sadly asked, "did they let me do it to them?"

She returned to the manse, sagged into a seat, and closed her eyes. Exhausted beyond words. Behind her she heard Kendi moved, but somehow she was still startled when pain bloomed on the side of her head.

—

Akua woke up. The Gods were laughing and Akua Sahelian woke up. Her back hurt, and fingers found a bloody scar on it, but she was breathing and when she rose in her bed she found Kendi Akaze seated across from her, eyes smiling. On a low table before him there were two objects. One was the Amaranth, smashed to pieces. The other looked like a strip of bone, carved with so many rows of small runes that it was hardly recognizable.

"Lodged in your spine," Kendi amiably said. "It was difficult to remove it without paralyzing you, but I managed."

"Why?" she croaked out.

"Because you are in pain," he said. "And I want you to drown in it without your necklace to save you."

"This is madness," Akua hissed.

"Is it?" Kendi said. "I followed you today. You have won the people, the Legions, the nobles. The Empire is in the palm of your hand, the Tower yours for the taking."

He leaned forward.

"And what do you think of that, Akua Sahelian?" he asked.

He was not lying, she realized with anguish. She'd known it too but shied away from looking the truth in the eye. After a lifetime of scheming and murdering, after struggling and betraying and burning every bridge there was to burn, the Empire was in the palm of her hand. She let it sink in, settle into her mind, until an answer came from the heart of her.

Akua threw up all over the marble floor.

"That's what I thought," Kendi said with cold, hard satisfaction.

—

Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

The knowledge of that circled Malicia's thoughts like a vulture, never close but never far. Amadeus' little orphan, turned into a brutal warlord, was marching on Ater to kill Alaya of Satus. Malicia tried to set the thought aside, but all the news brought to her only made it stand out more starkly. Her impostor in Mercantis had been unmasked, the devil slain and now the Forty-Stole Court was maddened with rage. They had cut all ties with the Tower, placed the Empire under embargo and offered a fresh round of loans to the Grand Alliance at courteous terms. And, worst of all, they had sought the protection of *Empress* Basilia of Aenia.

A title the entire League of Free Cities had recognized after the fall of Penthes, along with the worrisome one of 'Protector of the League'. Not only had the entire League of Free Cities followed Mercantis in severing ties, but now all its ports were closed to Praesi ships and the city-states were mobilizing for war. To join the war against the Dead King, Ime believed, but she could not be sure. All Malicia could know was that there was only one large military force on Calernia uncommitted to warfare, and that it was her hard-bitten foe. That hatred would linger for decades, lead the south to oppose her for the rest of her reign. If she had one.

Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

Ashur was still sundered in two, but it was no longer starving because Malicia no longer controlled the fleet meant to blockade it. The necromancers that'd usurped the fleet of Nicae through use of Still Waters no longer took her orders. They had taken to raiding the coasts of Ashur and the League for plunder and corpses. For now they traded with Stygian slaver ports for supplies, but that would be clamped down on by 'Empress' Basilia. They'd have to find other ports of call eventually, and Malicia feared that the Tideless Isles – scoured clean of corsairs by Ashur – would appeal. Her own masterstroke turned pirate might begin raiding the coasts of Praes.

Out west the Dominion had been stabilized by the First Prince's clever diplomacy after the Isbili were wiped out in some sort of blood magic ritual, but the Black Queen had won the higher prize by making the leading couple of Levant her pupils. Procer itself was finally collapsing even in the face of Hasenbach's inhuman efforts to keep it together – the first secession had happened six months later than Malicia's prediction, which was a staggering delay. The First Prince had kept together her empire with little more than letters and diplomacy as it tumbled into utter ruin. Malicia was genuinely admired the feat, but Hasenbach had not lasted *long enough*. The collapse was happening too early, there was nobody left in the Grand Alliance in a position to contest Callow's influence.

And Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

And all the ruinous reverses abroad were nothing to what trouble had now fallen on Praes. Wolof had been knocked out of the war, the alliance of Aksum and Nok subverted by a foreign power and now Okoro was cowering in its fortresses. The Clans had elected a leader, but Malicia was uncertain whether or not it had been Chieftain Troke Snaketooth. All the informants of the Eyes had gone silent overnight, and while the orc she'd made bargains with had been in the lead last she heard, there was no telling who had triumphed. Worse, the horde of greenskins was not only going nowhere Nok but it was very clearly marching on Ater, burning and pillaging everything in its path. Malicia was now facing the distinct possibility that even if the Grand Alliance retreated the Clans might still sack a weakened Ater.

Ater itself was slipping her fingers. She could feel in the way that Rule was weaking, the way fewer people truly saw her as the Dread Empress of Praes. Sentiment in the streets was turning against her, the Legions were a mutinous wreck riddled with desertions and the nobles come to attend the imperial court had plots the way stray dogs had fleas. She'd remained ahead of them, so far, but she was a dancer with a shrinking stage to dance on. Gods, even district mages were getting murdered out in the ruined districts. With a goblin steel blade, so it was likely some Legion deserter stirring up trouble. The only force Malicia could still truly trust in was the Sentinels, and the thought had rage frozen in her throat.

These were the same soldiers that had nailed her father to the floor of his own inn, *and Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.*

The brutal little bitch could not be bargained or reasoned with, she was out for blood and no matter what Malicia threw at her she seemed to come out on top. The battle in the Wasteland that should have broken her army had instead seen it *reinforced*, Marshal Juniper crowned the finest general to come out of the War College and Sepulchral bending the knee. It was even more ridiculous than Wolof, where even captured she'd somehow still claimed victory. Next she would be struck by lightning and somehow gain the power to call on storms, the absurd chit. There was no going around her, either. The First Prince no longer even bothered to read her letters and with Mercantis turning on her she no longer had an intermediary.

Only strength would make the Queen of Callow listen, and while the host gathered in Ater's shadow outnumbered the Army of Callow it was not Malicia's. It belonged to a hundred different nobles, too many of them traitors. And even if it gave battle, the empress was not certain it would win. The Army of Callow had humbled even the Legions, which had triumphed against the armies

of the old Praes handily. Malicia still had the Tower's arsenal, and for the first time in her reign she was deploying the artefacts and horrors that a thousand tyrants had sealed in deep vaults, but she had... concerns. Even should these powers bring her victory, it might be the kind worse than a defeat. Yet what else was she to do?

Alaya did not want to die, and Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

It was a relief when Ime came to meet with her, a distraction from her thoughts and their downwards spiral. **Connect** told her that her spymistress' loyalty had weakened but not in a harmful way. The nuance was hard to read, but Malicia had learned. Ime must have thought of running, then. She had not, Malicia reminded herself. For now, that was what mattered.

"Akua Sahelian spent most of yesterday healing refugees," Ime said, moments after being seated. "She then met with Marshal Nim in her private manse. Late that evening, she disappeared into a warded location – my agents were slain trying to find out with who. There were no survivors."

"I will summon her to the Tower, then," Malicia said, cocking an eyebrow. "As was the intent from the start. With the alternative being death, she will give us the names and facilitate a purge of the most disloyal."

"I thought you might say that," Ime evenly said. "But she's too dangerous to be allowed to live, Malicia. She has too much support while yours wanes."

Malicia stilled.

"What did you do?" she harshly asked.

"I used the kill switch," Ime said.

The empress mastered her anger. Only she had been supposed to be able to give that order. Yet another way her authority was weakening.

"Now we have no match for the Hierophant," she said. "Which might well lose us the siege."

"It's much worse than that," Ime said. "I used the artefact, but she's still alive. It was removed, Your Majesty. We no longer have a leash on her."

Malicia's fingers clenched. The Warlock – or close enough – was now free to act against her without deterrent. And she could not simply order her killed, because even should such an attempt work and fail to trigger an uprising against her killing Akua Sahelian



might well get her killed by virtue of there being no one able to stop Wekesa's son from mauling the defences of the capital. Her mind spun, looking for angles, but there were none. No answer, no clever trick.

From her silence, Ime must have come to the same conclusion.

"I advised against recruiting her," Ime quietly said. "She's always been a risk-"

"I *know* what you advised, Ime," Malicia barked out. "I assure you, there is no need to remind me. I deemed it necessary at the time."

She'd meant to kill the Sahelian or surrender her back to the Grand Alliance's custody the moment an arrangement was reached, either way ending her as a threat. Where had she found a mage trustworthy and skilled enough to find the artefact in her spine, much less remove it?

"We need to prepare to pull out of Ater," Ime advised. "Set our enemies on each other and approach again from a better position. It might be time to seriously consider wedding either Sargon Sahelian or Jaheem Niri. It keeps them committed and us in the game."

Jaheem Niri was already married, not that he wouldn't murder his wife in a heartbeat to become the imperial consort. The prospect of marrying either was repulsive enough that Alaya felt physically nauseous. She closed her eyes, looking for any other way. Ime stayed silent for a long time, then rose to her feet.

"I will prepare what I can, Alaya," the spymistress said. "Think on it, that is all I ask."

The empress stayed alone in the council room for a long time, with only silence and that ever-present thought for company. Eventually she rose to her feet, the sky outside turned to night. Sleep, she thought, sleep would put it all in perspective. But her quarters were not empty. On the table by the enchanted window, a woman was leaning back her seat, boots against the rim of table two hundred years old as she looked down at the city. Fair-haired and tanned, she had in her hand a crystal glass from Malicia's personal cabinet that she was refilling with wine from a silver flask. In her lap lay a lute, old and worn but still beautiful.

"I am told you are particularly vulnerable to Speaking," Alaya said. "I wonder, would I even need to vocalize to make you kill yourself?"

The Wandering Bard turned to offer her an insolent blue-eyed grin and a sloshing toast that spilled wine on her leathers.

"Those who live by the sword tend to get killed with swords," the Bard shrugged. "You know how it is, I'm sure."

"You are on the Red List," Malicia said. "Kill on sight."

"And yet here I am," the Bard noted, "still breathing."

A moment of silence.

"So you are," Malicia conceded.

The other woman laughed throatily, by the sound of it already well on her way to drunk. The empress knew better than to believe it made her any less dangerous.

"Have a drink with me, Dread Empress," the Bard said. "I had... well, I wouldn't call it *luck* all things considered, but it was a fateful draw."

Best to humour her for now. Malicia stepped aside to take a cup from her personal cabinet, which as she'd suspected was wide open already, and took a glass match for the Bard's own. She set it down on the table, eyebrow cocked, and took a seat of her own. Casually, as if this were not the knife's edge. The Bard set down the lute on her lap to lean forward, pouring Malicia's glass uncouthly full from her flask. The empress politely took her cup, breathing in the scent, and froze. She took a tentative sip. It was truly horrid wine, somehow tasting of mud, but Alaya knew it well. She'd been drinking it for years with someone now lost to her. Her heart clenched.

"Fate's a bitch," the Wandering Bard confessed. "I should know, I've served as the closest thing Calernia has to one since before... well, written calendars really. Only the Riddle-Maker's older and his kind didn't really bother with that sort of thing."

Ice, let her be ice. Smooth and cold and polished enough this old monster would see only her own reflection.

"You will not distract me with interesting fragments of history," Malicia said. "You came here with a purpose."

"It's the only way I can go anywhere," the Bard snorted, then drank deep of her cup. "Gah, definitely not a *lucky* draw. But as I was saying, my good – well, you know what I mean – empress, I feel like the time where we were enemies has passed. At least temporarily, yes?"

"You killed Sabah," Alaya evenly said.

"You liked her," the Bard noted. "So did I. Most people did, I imagine, when she wasn't eating or killing them. But she needed to die so I could get my way. So she did."

Ice, ice. She would not think of kind smiles or the children left behind, for where would that lead her? Only ice would see her live out the year. Malicia moved her lips into a smile, did not let it reach her eyes.

"And how many of my troubles can be laid at your feet, I wonder?" Malicia asked.

"The funny thing is," the Bard said, "honestly not that much."

She waved a hand dismissively, trailing wine all over the table.

"I work through Named," the Bard said, revealing nothing the Eyes had not already told her, "and Named haven't been your problem. Your empire has been going to shit because your Role doesn't match your Name."

"Is that so?" Malicia politely smiled.

"You've been ruling like a Chancellor," the Bard said. "But the Chancellor's not meant to be on top of things in these parts. A Dread Empress is meant to add, inspire, create. You've been dividing, lessening, binding. Chancellor's work, and that's why it's all been going downhill: you no longer have other Named on your side to compensate for that."

"I told you history would not distract me," Malicia said. "Did you think *namelore* would?"

"I just like to talk," the Bard artlessly confessed. "But let's be all business, if you want. You have a problem: Catherine Foundling very badly wants you dead and there's no one left in a position to stop her."

"Ater still stands," Malicia said.

"Said every Dread Empress who ever got murdered," the Bard replied, rolling her eyes. "It's not a *siege* that's going to decide this. You've got an empire's worth of stories come home to roost in Ater, Allie, and that's what kills or saves you."

"And here I had thought it would be a blade," Malicia smiled.

The Bard snorted.

"Sure, if you want to be obtuse about it," she said. "The blade's just the natural consequence of the story turning against you. It doesn't drive the carriage, it's a destination. And you're in luck, my friend, because it happens that destination your-head-on-a-pike just isn't doing anything for me. It's a bit of pain in my ass, to be honest."

"What a fortunate happenstance," Malicia said. "I, too, would prefer to avoid my decapitation. You have thoughts on how this might be achieved?"

"I'm all about thoughts," the Bard agreed. "Just so many thoughts. So lemme share one with you: do you know when a Named is most vulnerable?"

"At the end of a pattern of three, presumably," Malicia said.

While those did not necessarily end in death for the villain involved, that did seem to be the prevalent trend.

"Nah," the Bard slurred, "it's just before they come into their Name. See, that's the spot where they're riding fate but they're not really *protected* yet."

The empress considered the other woman a moment, drinking shallowly from her cup.

"I am told," Malicia said, "that Catherine Foundling is coming into a Name."

"Defence isn't how you win this game," the Bard said. "So we're going on the offensive, you and I."

Malicia's eyes narrowed.

"How?"

"It's not set yet, what she's turning into," the Bard said. "So we nudge it so it becomes what we need. The east that is land and armies and politics, all the things that pass, instead of the *East* – the story, the idea. Old Evil and buried grudges, the other half of the world. She's only as dangerous as what she keeps, you see."

She was starting to.

"And when she transitions?"

"There's this joke I love," the blue-eyed Bard enthusiastically said. "It's from Ashur so, you know, it's not actually *funny*, but it's great anyways and it goes like this – and stop me if you've heard it before!"

She cleared her throat, which somehow had her spilling a third of her cup over her own lute and then cursing before wiping it off effectively with her sleeve.

"Right so there's this man who goes to a priest, a Speaker," the Bard said. "And he says that his daughter's taken up with some Praesi, proper smitten. So he's come for advice because he needs a time, a place and man to officiate."

The Bard began chortling, already taken with her own joke.

"So the Speaker gives them, only the man comes back the day after all riled up," she said. "Says it was a disaster. Why, the priest asks. Did the wedding not go well? And then the man erupts: wedding? I was asking about-"

"-a funeral," Malicia finished.

It was easy enough to infer from context. The Bard pouted.

"I don't know why people keep doing that to me," she whined. "No wonder you're a villain."

Malicia ignored her... ally's petty moaning, herself taking petty satisfaction in having caused it.

"A time, a place and a man to officiate," Dread Empress Malicia mused. "That is all?"

"That's the good thing about Catherine, Allie," the Intercessor grinned, all teeth and malice. "You can always count on her to bring the knife."

## Chapter 22: Advent

*"Every crisis is an opportunity, Chancellor. Mostly an opportunity to die, but occasionally other things as well."*

– Dread Empress Malevolent II

"I always forget how ridiculously huge Ater is," I said.

In the distance the tall ramparts of the City of Gates loomed, crowned with bastions atop the inner walls and the gargantuan silhouette of the Tower rising to touch the clouds. It was an impressive sight, the kind that gave you pause even if you knew – as I did – that it was rare for the Dread Empire to actually have enough military strength in the city to man the entire set of walls properly. The capital was so large that if it were not so terribly fortified it might actually be indefensible, though another school of thought back in the College had argued that the size was actually part of the defences. Tyrants in the Tower had never been shy about drawing their opponents into abandoned districts before setting them aflame.

"Surely Salia is even larger," Arthur ventured. "It was raised in fertile lands near a river, not at the heart of the Wasteland."

"In size Ater is larger," I noted. "Entire sections of it are usually abandoned, though, and Salia definitely has more people in it."

The Squire eyed the capital of the Dread Empire with a skeptical look on his face, which had me smothering a smile. Back when I'd first come to Ater I'd been too wrapped up into myself and what Amadeus was teaching me to really take it in properly, but arriving as part of an invading army was giving my fellow orphan a bit more perspective.

"I don't see how they can feed that many people," Arthur admitted. "Or even have enough drinking water. Is it an underground source like Hainaut?"

"Five different underground lakes," I confirmed. "The Miezens built a bunch of enchanted funnels when they first took over the city that feed a system of fountains anyone can take from, but there's been works since. Dread Emperor Vile made aqueducts and cisterns when the population got too large and Dread Emperor Tenebrous-"

"Isn't that the one who turned into a giant spider?" the Squire asked, sounding amused.

"Allegedly," I snorted. "No knows for sure, though there sure are a lot of them under the city nowadays. Anyhow, Tenebrous made an enormous reservoir to catch rain and freeze it, a reserve for when the city is in drought."

It was a pleasant change to be able to tell when Scribe was approaching. Like a touch in the back of my mind, a star I could see shining in the black whenever I closed my eyes. One of many.

"Vile's cisterns were dismantled under Dread Emperor Venal," Eudokia said, standing right behind Arthur.

Who nearly jumped out of his skin, swallowing a curse. It was a nostalgic sight: she used to do the same to me back when I was the Squire.

"That's the one who thought Ater was a shithole and tried to build his own capital, right?" I asked.

"Indeed," Scribe agreed. "The cisterns were lined with silver for purity enchantments, he had them broken down to use the metal in coinage."

Well, the man had come by his regnal name honestly.

"They were never replaced?" Arthur asked.

"Much later," Scribe replied. "Maleficent the Second had the silver statues in Delos' great library melted down and used for replacements after the Secretariat tried to refuse her access to their histories."

She'd had a way with insults, Maleficent the Second, when she wanted to make a point. It was said she'd had the third of the Magisterium that'd refused to surrender to her enslaved and forced into the Spears of Stygia as an admonishment.

"So thirst isn't going to make them surrender," Arthur said. "What about food, though?"

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Do you want a lecture on how the imperial tax system works?" I drily asked.

"Is it murder?" the boy drily replied. "I'm guessing murder is involved."

"Ater has the largest granaries in the country," I told him. "They're massive, the size of palaces."

"Even with the field ritual gradient and rotations introduced under Nefarious, the fields around the city can only feed a little under half of Ater," Scribe said. "The remainder comes from taxes. High Seats are charged with collecting a tenth of the harvest in their lands and that of their vassals, which is then sent to Ater."

"Independent lords can have harsher or lighter burdens, depending on whether or not the Tower likes them," I added, "and the freeholders of the Green Stretch are bound to sell a third of their harvest to the Tower at a fixed price."

Less than it was worth, usually, but it was part of the terms they leased the land from the Tower at.

"Malicia improved the yields for Ater significantly during her reign," Eudokia admitted, "by changing the laws so that lords could pay part of their monetary taxes to the Tower in food instead. Poorer lords with good years leaped at the opportunity, and with Callowan grain pouring in all the while there is a truly prodigious amount of foodstuffs in the city at the moment."

"We're not going to starve them out," I summed up. "They've got six months in them, at least, and maybe as much as a year if they ration severely enough."

We did not have six months, I kept to myself. Cordelia believed that Procer would finally break in five, but we had to leave Praes before that: it'd take us at least a month and a half to return west and half a month to muster for the attack on Keter. We had three months here, to be generous, but that'd be a razor-thin margin. Two was more realistic, two and maybe the odd week tossed it on top of it. Which meant we would need to either force a surrender or take the city by force, storming the walls. I was

very much trying to avoid the latter, because the last of the Legions would bleed us dry for it. The entire city was a fucking deathtrap of old artefacts and half-buried monstrosities. If we didn't get several demons tossed at us before this was over I'd eat my crown. I cast a look at Scribe.

"You needed me for something?"

She nodded.

"There is word from the High Lady of Kahtan," Eudokia said.

Takisha Muraqib was the leader of the largest chunk of enemy troops outside the city, so I'd made a point of trying to approach her for a settlement the moment I could. If she turned on Malicia a lot of nobles would follow her example, which might well take the city for us without an assault. Loyalty in Praes was a lot like horse racing: people loved a winner, but if the champion limped all bets were off.

"We'll talk later," I told Arthur. "Sit down with Apprentice and figure out tactics for fighting the Black Knight indoors or on a street, it's where you're most likely to run into her. If you come up with something solid, we'll try it out on Named."

I already had several particularly vicious exercises in mind. As far as I was concerned, you'd never really had to deal with a proper ambush until you tried grounds that the only son and pupil of Wekesa the Warlock had been given an hour to trap. Last time he'd temporarily ended gravity in a warded circle, which had been spectacularly amusing to watch on top of being very humiliating for the kids.

"I will, Your Majesty," the Squire swore. "We've been talking over ideas on the march."

"I'll look forward to it, then," I said.

The kid – young man, really, but it was hard to think of him that way – left promptly to get to it, which left me weathering Scribe's mild gaze. I raised an eyebrow at her. The one over the dead eye, I was trying to train myself into doing that. It drew attention to the eye cloth, made the faint-hearted uncomfortable.

"Mentorship is not without danger," Scribe said. "Especially mentorship of a hero."

"I don't teach him myself," I said. "Been careful about that. All I've done with him is talk, never so much as a spar."

"Given your own teacher, I would have thought you aware that the *talking* is the most important part," she replied.



"Named can learn from others without being pupils," I said. "It's not like every time you pick up a trick or a bit of tactics from someone you're wedded to them as mentor and apprentice. I've learned things from Malicia and Captain. Hells, I learned from the Pilgrim once or twice."

Not that he'd ever gone out of his way to teach me anything. Besides, I'd been careful to give neither tricks nor tactics to Arthur Foundling. If I ever ended up on the other side of the field from the kid, I wanted as much of my repertoire still up my sleeve as I could fit.

"It's a fine line," Scribe noted. "I do not seek to scold, to be clear. It is your choice to make, and you have drunk from deeper wells of namelore than I ever did."

"Always thought that was weird, to be honest," I admitted. "The Calamities were around for almost sixty years in one form or another, it seems strange most of you never picked up more. Malicia too, I guess, but her I can understand. It's not like any hero made it to the Tower in her lifetime."

"It was always Amadeus who saw to those tactics," she said, "so in a sense most of us never considered it any more necessary to acquire skill in this area than we would have thought to rival Wekesa or sorcery or Sabah in strength."

"You still survive decades and decades as Named," I said. "You had to have learned *some* things."

"I suppose in detail my experience outweighs yours," Eudokia mused. "Prior to the Truce and Terms being founded I'd encountered many more Named. But you've no doubt realized by now that there is no truly reliable method to deal with Named opponents."

"Swords tend to work," I drily said, "but I catch your drift. The same story you can ride to kill someone will get you killed against another."

"I imagine I've read more stories and studied foreign myths than you have," Scribe said, "for the same is true of Amadeus, but I do not have the... knack. I can make a plan and execute it, but I find it difficult to improvise and adapt a victory the way you did against the Arcadian courts, for example, or at the Princes' Graveyard. It requires a mindset that I struggle with, as do most Named."

"A lot of us tend to specialize," I agreed.

"It narrows our understanding of the world and the way we seek victories," Scribe said. "In that sense you are anomalous, though not unique."

Yeah, I had no delusions there. My father's way of using stories was different than mine but no less dangerous, and there'd been several points in the Tenth Crusade where Tariq had come very close to either killing or shackling me. Kairos had been up there too, the mad bastard, using the methods of the Old Tyrants with prescient skill. I also figured that Ranger had to be good at reading stories, to have survived this long antagonizing the amount of Named she had. Nobody acting like that lived as long as she had without being able to tell when a story was going to get you killed.

And there was, of course, the patron goddess of namelore waiting above it all: the Wandering Bard, the Intercessor. Who had declared war on me in Wolof only to disappear into thin air. I would have liked to call it impotence on her part, but that was the kind of delusion that'd get me killed. If I hadn't seen her it'd been because she was moving her pieces into place, preparing her killing stroke. And since there was only one part left to this campaign, the fall of Ater, inside the City of Gates would be where she waited for me. I shook my head free of the thoughts.

"So what did High Lady Takisha reply?" I asked.

"She is willing to meet," Scribe said. "Yet I would temper your expectations: Princess Vivienne believes Takisha won't move unless we promise to back her for the Tower."

"Is there anybody in this fucking country who doesn't want me to back them for the fucking Tower?" I growled. "Any moment now some hell will spit out Traitorous so he can bloody well ask me too."

"It is unusual that you would be so sought, in my opinion," Scribe noted. "You have dealt with or rule over every major amalgamation of power east of the Whitecaps, an amount of influence that I some ways surpasses what Malicia wielded after the Conquest."

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. I'd made a claim, before raising High Lady Abreha from the grave. One of authority over others. Creation was moving to meet it. I was finding it easier to parse out what people wanted – my instincts already whispered that Vivienne was right, High Lady Takisha would not move without the Tower as a prize – but that was the lesser part of it. I could feel Named, now. When I closed my eyes, I could see them like stars shining the dark. Only it wasn't all of them. Most heroes I couldn't make out. Vivienne yes, and the Squire when he was close, but never the Silver Huntress. Authority, I thought. It was about authority.

And the clearest part of it was that Below smiled on me herding their own, a warden to villains.

"Influence doesn't always pay off," I finally said. "Let's go talk with Juniper, Scribe. See what our options are before meeting up with High Lady Takisha."

—

The Marshal of Callow wasn't one to mince words, so she came out with it bluntly.

"Depends if they're stupid about it or not," Juniper said.

Our maps of Ater were accurate, as there hadn't been any major works done in the capital since they'd been drawn, but they were unreliable in the sense that they'd didn't tell us what parts of the city were being inhabited at the moment. Malicia had taken in refugees by the thousands so a lot of the empty districts would have filled up, but which and by who was anybody's guess. Scribe and the Jacks had a few people in the city, but it was a drop in the bucket for a place that large. I doubted even the Tower had a full accounting to use, and for all her faults the empress had built up a prodigious bureaucracy in her seat of power.

"I'm not going to stand here and defend the stock of Praesi aristocracy," I said, "but let's assume they *won't* make the worst possible choices."

"Then we're in a tricky position," Juniper said. "When it comes down to it, Ater isn't really a city that can be sieged the traditional way. It's the incarnation of a logistical pit: to surround a city this large with any real strength, enough to keep away sorties, you need an army large enough it's impossible to feed in this region."

Which meant massive supply lines stretching over some of the most dangerous lands on Calernia, in constant danger in collapse before enemy soldiers even got involved. If you were a foreign army, anyway. The High Seats are much more manageable wars on their hands, which went some way in explaining why so few external enemies had been successful against Ater compared to internal ones.

"That much we're agreed on," I said. "We're not going to try, and by the looks they're well aware of that."

Our eyes moved the map between us. Ater had nine gates, massive things that had once needed specially bred monsters to be opened or closed until they were replaced by gear mechanisms a century or two back. Of those nine gates, three were currently still open. The Army of Callow was encamped to the west of the capital, near an abandoned town that had large and deep wells, but the three gates on the eastern side of the capital were wide open. Which only made sense, given that a gaggle of nobles from all over Praes had brought around thirty thousand men from various

private armies and encamped there. They'd not entered the city, as it was against the laws of the Empire to bring troops inside the capital without permission and no one was yet ready to move against Malicia, but our scouts confirmed there was constant movement through the gates.

"High Lady Abreha is but a week behind us," Scribe noted. "Her army tips the balance of power in our favour."

"Eh," I hedged.

"We can likely beat the noble armies on the field," Juniper agreed. "They have no unified command structure or proper organization."

"And they've got a lot of household troops, but they've also got a large proportion Taghreb tribal levies," I said. "Good raiders and irregulars, not so great in a shield wall. In a stand-up fight on plains, we'll smash that army to pieces."

"It will not give us that fight, I take it," Eudokia ventured.

"They'll retreat into the capital," I said. "Use us as leverage for getting their troops inside without officially rebelling against Malicia. Given that her trustworthy forces are running thin, she'll likely have to bend."

"The remaining Legions are around eight thousand strong," Scribe noted, "but even my people never got a good read on the total number of Sentinels. Too many of them never leave the Tower."

"You gave us a floor of eight thousand so I'm assuming at least ten," I noted. "I'm skeptical how good they'll be in a fight, considering their heads are supposed to be fucked to the Hells and back to make them perfectly loyal, but it shouldn't matter anyway considering most of them will be tied up keeping the city from falling apart. I'd be surprised if Malicia can shake loose more than two or three thousand to throw at us."

"Pickler believes she can breach the capital's walls, and if she does I believe we can take Ater after High Lady Abreha reinforces us," Juniper said. "But that holds only if the nobles stay out of it. Otherwise they'll bog us down in the outer districts and we'll be forced out by spellfire."

We were at a massive magical disadvantage here, even with Masego weighing heavily on the scales. The sheer amount of mage cadres we'd be facing if the enemy got to mobilize fully against us was pretty daunting. There were at least a few hundred mages capable of High Arcana in Praes, and almost all of them would be shooting at us. And that was without even getting into diabolism, which I saw as pretty much inevitable. It was a historical staple of Praesi getting cornered.

"Keeping the nobility divided and unable to coordinate defences seems a priority, then," Scribe said. "Should I begin arranging assassinations?"

"Not yet," I said, then bit my lip. "Assassin, could he get High Lady Takisha?"

If she got killed, her High Seat would tear itself up over succession and Kahtan would no longer be able to serve as the banner under which all the lesser Taghreb nobility gathered. And the Taghreb were where the manpower was at, right now. The Wasteland had bloodied itself with continued civil war, while the Hungering Sands hadn't really seen any action aside from raids since Foramen was seized by surprise. If we broke up the southerners into smaller squabbling blocs and then hit Ater before someone could step into the power vacuum, it was possible they'd stay out of the fight.

"Takisha is remarkably paranoid when it comes to her personal safety," Scribe admitted. "Three layers of amulets at all times and frequent body doubles. Even odds Assassin would get to her, being conservative."

"We're holding back on that, then," I said. "Look up targets that would destabilize the coalition behind her, but I'm not pulling the trigger on that yet."

If we took a swing and missed it'd make negotiating with her pretty awkward afterwards. Praesi didn't take this sort of thing as personally as most people would, but it certainly wouldn't win me any favours.

"None of that matters when we haven't addressed the dragon in the hut," Juniper said. "There's an army as large as all of ours combined marching on Ater as we speak."

"Three weeks away, at the current pace," Scribe said. "Matters could be resolved here before it arrives."

"I'm not sure that'd be an improvement," I admitted. "Until we know who the warlord leading the Clans is I'm not keen on punching a hole in the walls of Ater."

Juniper snorted.

"Let's not take the fucking city only to have to hold its busted walls against one hundred thousand orcs," she summed up. "The military wisdom of the College shines in us still, Catherine."

I grinned back at her.

"Wisest heads of the age, Hellhound, that's us," I replied.

Scribe let out a little choking sound but did not go as far as contradicting us.

"We've sent scouts their way and I know Hakram's still alive," I said. "I'm inclined not to think the worst."

I could feel his Name, see its star out in the black.

"If Dag Clawtoe had been elected, Hakram would have scried us by now," Juniper retorted. "I don't like it."

"If the Blackspears were in charge they'd be burning Nok by now, not approaching Ater," I pointed out. "I won't pretend I'm not concerned, Juniper, but Adjutant will bring this home. He always does."

"We should prepare for the eventuality that they are foes, at least," the Hellhound pressed.

I grimaced and thought it over. It'd split our focus, but to be honest at the moment there wasn't much for the Army of Callow to do. We were preparing an offensive for when Abreha – and High Lord Dakarai of Nok, who'd joined her with a small retinue – arrived with her troops, but it would be Pickler and her sappers handling the most of that. Charging into a breach wasn't the kind of fighting that required extensive preparations, just guts and steel.

"Do it," I finally said. "But make sure the general staff knows it's theoretical. I don't want half our camp convinced we're going to be fighting the Clans."

Fighting a warlord – maybe even just rumours we would – might actually cause desertions from the part of my armies that'd been the steadiest through several wars. As far as I knew, the loyalty of the Legions had never been tested in this manner and I suspected it was for good reason. A lot of orcs put loyalty to the Legions or the Army of Callow higher than allegiance to abstract things like the Tower or my crown, but I wasn't so sure that loyalty would win out if it was their own clans on the other side of the field.

"I'll keep it quiet," Juniper said.

"Which leaves only one force unaccounted for," I said. "Amadeus of the Green Stretch."

Scribe studied me.

"You're sure he's here?" she asked.

"I know Ranger's in the city," I said. "And they've stayed together until now."

I'd actually learned a little something courtesy of the Lady of the Lake, aside from her rough location: whatever it was that bound me to Named, it was possible to cut it. Temporarily, at least. The... tie began to reform after half a day had passed, more or less, and from what I could feel Ranger was becoming increasingly irritated at having to cut it off again and again. *I bet Sever would have done it permanently*, I thought with some amusement. I'd have to remember to tell her when we ran into each other, along with a pleasant question about how it felt to be inferior to inferior to the Saint even posthumously.

"He's a dangerous man, Catherine, but he doesn't have an army," Juniper said. "There's only so much he could do."

I winced at that, and so did Eudokia. There was a moment of silence, the two of us waiting for something brutally ironic to happen, but nothing showed up save an increasingly puzzled look on the Marshal of Callow's face.

"Don't repeat that," I finally said. "It might end up costing us."

She still looked skeptical, but in matters of namelore she knew better than to contradict me. I dragged myself to my feet, massaging my upper leg to press down on a cramp. Had I taken herbs today? I couldn't recall. I'd gotten too used to Hakram arranging these things for me. Might as well have another cup if I was going to be riding Zombie.

"A short detour and we'll get moving," I told Scribe. "Let's go find out what High Lady Takisha has to tell us."

—

Scribe despised riding horses even though she'd been doing it for decades, which I never ceased to find hilarious. Zombie disliked having to stay on the ground to keep up with the other Named and my escort of knights, but she perked up after I promised her meat when we returned to camp. She was unsettlingly fond of pig guts, which she ate very messily before grooming herself for hours. A truly vain creature, my mount. I approved. At this point I'd been through these little meetings often enough that I wasn't surprised when the Praesi came in dressed richly enough to pay for a bridge across the Hwaerte and I didn't bother to take it in the way I had with the Sahelians. No, this time it was a smaller detail I got stuck on.

I'd arranged a meeting only with High Lady Takisha, but there were *three* great aristocrats waiting for me.

The first was Takisha Muraqib, a handsome dark-haired woman in her fifties with a dignified air and enough gold on her it'd likely add up to several ingots if melted down. Arguably now the

second most powerful in Praes, as the fall of Foramen to goblin hands had led all the Taghreb nobility to gather behind her. The second was High Lord Jaheem Niri of Okoro, a strikingly good-looking man with warm golden eyes and a roguish smile. He had to be what, in his mid-forties? He had a daughter a little younger than me, but she wasn't his oldest. The real surprise, though, was the third. High Lady Wither of Foramen, once Matron of the High Ridge Tribe. Pickler's mother.

Also the sworn enemy of High Lady Takisha, and according to my spies still very far away.

No wonder the Matrons of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries had sent word they were sending a delegation north to Ater to treat with me. It would be in part so they'd have a seat at the table after Ater fell, as I'd expected, but now a second reason was looking at me through pale yellow eyes. The High Lady of Kahtan might despise Wither and want to take Foramen from her, but that enmity was nothing compared to how much the Grey Eyries hated the traitor who'd turned on them in exchange for becoming recognized as High Lady by Malicia.

Still, this reception was a surprise and not a welcome one. It was taking me by surprise in multiple ways and suggesting there were undercurrents to imperial politics I'd not sniffed out. A dangerous thing, to treat carefully with. It was fortunate that I was such a dab hand at diplomacy these days.

"How long have the three of you stood so close?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. "One hour, two? And no one's dead. That has got to be some sort of record."

I hear the knight behind me choke down on a snort. The Praesi were less amused. Wither was impatient, Takisha sneered and High Lord Jaheem raised his eyebrows in a way that suggested rolling them without ever actually doing it. Impressive trick, that.

"We greet you, Black Queen," High Lady Takisha began, "and in-"

"Spare me the speech," I cut through, tone flat. "I arranged talks with you, not three High Seats. I might be considered justified to see this as a breach of our truce terms, so let's get to whatever point the three of you made yourselves to stand together to make."

"This is poor diplomacy," High Lord Jaheem said. "High Lord Sargon spoke better of you."

"Sargon was a stepping stone, not the last thing between me and the end of this irritating little war," I replied. "He got as much courtesy as I'll ever afford High Seat. You, though?"

I smiled toothily.



"Count yourselves lucky this doesn't begin and end with knives."

"You don't have enough knives to get this done, Black Queen," High Lady Wither said, voice startling reedy. "That is our point. If you come for Ater steel in hand, you will lose."

"That's arguable at best," I noted. "But I'll generously assume you came with *something* to offer, since only a fool would think I've come to Ater just to walk away."

"We are willing to support a negotiated settlement with the Tower," High Lady Takisha said, tone irritated. "So long as the sovereignty of the Dread Empire remains untouched, there is some room for compromise."

I cocked an eyebrow over my dead eye, unimpressed by the phrasing, and to my satisfaction I saw her glance at the cloth.

"I sacked Wolof without needing to break its walls, broke the Legions in Kala and now my army is camped beneath the very walls of the City of Gates," I said. "If some room for compromise is the best you have to offer, we'll be resuming this conversation after I've killed a few thousand more of you."

"You would refuse terms without hearing them?" High Lord Jaheem said.

"I'd refuse to humour posturing," I flatly replied. "You're here to do me a favour, I broke through your front door and set fire to your house. If you want me to stop torching everything in sight, *make it worth my while*."

"We would be willing to support armies being sent to aid the Grand Alliance," High Lady Wither said. "It's an open secret you're badly in need of diabolists."

"That's a start," I noted.

"The Blessed Isle can be formally ceded back to the crown of Callow," High Lady Takisha said.

Huh, hadn't seen that one coming. On the surface it was a worthless piece of land, considering it was a blackened wasteland ruined by my father's use of massed goblinfire, but that was a surface perception only. It was a strategic stronghold, the best way to keep Praes penned on its side of the Wasaliti should it decide to get unruly.

"That's worth something," I agreed, "but it's not why I'm here. The Tower would need to sign the Liesse Accords."

They didn't look too pleased by that, but neither were they surprised.

"We might support such a thing, given the right incentives," High Lord Jaheem said. "The text as we've obtained has some... concerning inclusions."

That sounded like someone after diabolism exemptions, which wasn't happening, but I wasn't above throwing some minor concessions elsewhere if that was what it took.

"The final draft of the Accords has not been made," I said. "There is still time to negotiate."

"That is reassuring to hear, Your Majesty," High Lady Takisha smiled.

*I just bet*, I thought.

"And who would it be that negotiates the terms of the Accords for you?" I asked. "Who do you mean to replace Malicia?"

*Akua*, I guessed. Had to be. She was the only prominent person left in Praes with enough power to be considered and not enough enemies to be too badly opposed. And what a knife in the belly it would be for this lot, when turned away from them. Just in time for me to cram my father down their throats. Silence stretched on for a moment.

"We do not mean to replace the Dread Empress," High Lady Takisha said. "We are loyal subjects, Black Queen."

My eye moved between them, and appallingly enough they looked serious. Not about being loyal, that was just absurd, but about not supporting Malicia being deposed. At least not here and now.

"Dread Empress Malicia has made herself too much a foe of the Grand Alliance and an ally of the Dead King to be allowed to keep her power," I plainly said. "You might have believed this to be negotiable, but allow me to now disabuse you of that notion."

I leaned forward, cold-eyed.

"If I have to burn Ater to the ground around her to see her driven out of the Tower, *I will*."

My gaze swept over all of them.

"If I must step over your mutilated corpses to get my way, do not believe for a moment I will hesitate. The Dread Empire has been nothing but thorn in our side as most of Calernia fights to hold back the annihilation of all life on this continent," I said. "There is not a speck of sympathy left for any of you west of the Wasaliti: I could raze every High Seat and even the fucking heroes would applaud."

I drew back, put on a friendly smile.

"Malicia is a stone around your necks," I said. "Put up someone else and then we can talk."

"Your threats are empty, Black Queen," High Lord Jaheem said. "You do not have long before you must return west with diabolists, else this campaign will have doomed your allies."

I met the man's golden eyes with a cold smile.

"I still have months," I said. "It's my patience that's in danger of running out, Jaheem Niri. Beware of that, while you still can."

Yet even as I spoke, I knew there were no grounds no win here. I'd made a mistake, I could feel it. Not in refusing to bend over the matter of Malicia or making it clear how far I was willing to go over the matter, but somewhere else. Focusing, I could almost feel it out. Neither Jaheem Niri nor Wither were surprised, they had expected this, so it was High Lady Takisha who'd wanted this conversation to happen. Why? What did she gain? *She wants to move them*, my instincts whispered, but I could not yet tell to which purpose. I almost could if I focused, but somehow I was sure that if I closed my eyes the stars in the darkness would distract me. But Takisha had gotten something she'd wanted from this, that much I was certain of.

Time to cut my losses before she got more.

"There is no point to this conversation," I stated. "I tell you only this: when we resume it, the terms will have grown starker."

I left them to that, casually tossing in the insult of not giving proper courtesies while leaving. Already I was frowning, lost in thought. I'd just taken a hit without knowing about it until it was too late, and I still didn't know what it'd been *for*. I did not have as clean a read on the forces at play in Praes as I'd thought I had, and if I kept it up it would cost me.

It was time to sharpen the same knives I'd wielded at the Graveyard.

## Chapter 23: Sung; Singer

*"To fear treachery is a mark of inferiority, for fundamentally it is a fear that espouses the lie of safety. Treachery is only despised because it comes from within, from behind the wall. Only a fool believes that there is such a thing as shelter from harm."*

— Dread Emperor Perfidious

I'd not been to Spite Valley since the war games.

Its real name was Koso Valley, but no one who'd been through the War College actually called it that. The old fort that companies were assigned to hold or take during war games stood empty, Malicia's generals past trying to actually hold the approaches to the capital, but it wasn't there I was headed. I led Zombie downslope, past the lone watchtower and the woods until the slope began to rise again. Hills and a mess of rocky outcroppings awaited, small footpaths leading up until I found long abandoned fire pits. Rat Company had camped here, I remembered, on that first night I'd met people not yet become some of the most important in my life. Hakram. Robber. Nauk. Pickler. Ratface. Killian, once upon a time.

Nilin, too, who'd died before I found out he was a traitor.

In a way it was a little like coming home, a different one from the narrow streets of Laure but no less dear. In a lot of ways, I'd taken the first steps towards the woman I now was in this quiet valley. The shadows lengthened and night neared, and I left my escorts in the fort. I could make my own fire and Vivienne had brought cuts of meat to roast. We got to it with the practice efficiency of people who'd travelled together for sometimes months at a time, splitting up the tasks. Before long we had roasted pork and freshly picked berries for supper by an open fire as darkness crept over the horizon. In the distance I saw the campfires of my knights, but aside from that we were alone.

"Why here?" Vivienne asked. "You used the Mavian prayers near our camp before the Graveyard. Why travel hours away this time?"

"Worried?" I teased.

"I am," the Princess baldly admitted. "Half the Dread Empire wants you dead and assassins only need to get lucky once. I don't like that you're so far from our wards, much less alone."

"People would distract," I shrugged. "And we never actually told anyone where I was headed, so there's no secret for her spies to dig up."

"But why *here*?" Vivienne pressed.

I looked away, dragged my gaze across the jutting rocks around us. They looked like teeth, in the right light, as if we were sitting in some great beast's maw.

"It began here, my time with the Legions," I finally said. "And it will end in Ater."

"Symmetry-"

"Has its uses," I cut in. "Learn that. Creation *likes* patterns, Vivienne. Rules of three, seven and one, a hundred little ironic echoes. You either use that or fall victim to it."

"I'll not argue namelore with you, Cat," she replied, raising her palms in surrender. "It just seems out of the way, which is unlike you. You like being at the heart of the hive."

I sighed.

"I do, sometimes," I said. "For this the quiet will suit better."

The Princess frowned.

"You're worried about the Bard," she said.

"I'll be worried about the Bard even when I'm sure I've killed her for good," I said. "The Arsenal is the only time I've ever come close to pulling one on her, and I'm still not sure she didn't get what she wanted out of that mess."

It'd come close to costing me Hakram, and the more I heard about what was happening out west the more I wondered if I'd really been the focus of what she was after. Tensions between the First Prince and the White Knight were continuing to rise, to my worry, and I'd not forgotten it was the events at the Arsenal that'd started the enmity between those two.

"She's not a god," Vivienne said.

"She's the patron goddess of stories, or close enough," I snorted. "I actually think it's like a domain for her, you know? The Augur insisted she could 'see all stories' and there's not a lot of things for Named that give you that much power over a concept s broad."

"Kairos Theodosian beat her," the Princess said. "So can we."

Ah, I thought, *but did he?* She'd definitely not anticipated Anaxares the Hierarch being such trouble for her, I thought, but Kairos' scheme against Judgement? That, I was not so sure. It seemed too much of a coincidence, Cordelia fishing out an ealamal that was once a Seraphim just after the Tyrant plotted a way to shut the door on Judgement's fingers. The Dead King had put us on the path of finding out a terrifying truth about the Intercessor, that she could influence angels and so that using the ealamal was as good as giving her power of life and death over most of Calernia, but we'd found it out after Kairos had 'saved' us from that peril.

And in the depths of Liesse thrice-ruined, Kairos Theodosian had been spared execution at my hand because the Intercessor had given him a way out.

I'd never learned why. He'd traded for that, I knew, but what did he have to offer? I did not think that the Intercessor was behind any of these... movements, but that wasn't the nature of her power. She could see it all and stand where she wanted, when she wanted to be there. The Intercessor threaded the needle, that was her terrible trick, and all she ever needed to do was to follow the... objects in motion. I'd been fighting her for years, often bitterly, and to this day the only thing I was pretty sure of was that she'd tried to make me replace her at the Arsenal. Trap me into taking up her mantle as either a rival or a successor. I found it pretty telling she'd since decided to go about killing me seriously.

Almost like I was of no further use.

"Ater is the first place where it's decided whether or not we lose the war against the Dead King," I finally said. "If it goes badly, Vivienne, it could fuck up everything. There's no room for mistakes."

She hummed.

"And so you disappear into the night," she said. "So you can scheme in peace."

"I'm preparing," I piously corrected. "And speaking of, did you get the sheets done?"

"I did," Vivienne agreed, reaching for her saddlebag.

She handed me a neat sheath of scrolls. I wiggled one out, unrolling it, and found a rather good depiction of Dread Empress Malicia looking back at me from the top of the parchment sheet.

"They all this good?" I asked.

"They are," she said. "Got an officer from the Thirteenth with some talent to draw them."

I paused.

"Thanks," I said.

She eyed me skeptically.

"You hate it," Vivienne stated.

"I didn't say that," I protested.

"Oh Gods," the Princess said, sounding appalled, "you actually think they're *too* good, don't you?"

It just wasn't the same if the drawings weren't unspeakably shitty. Last time it was Robber who'd drawn them, and I still had

those parchments tucked away in a chest somewhere along with other mementos. Tolerantly amused, Vivienne took out a writing set from her knapsack and stole the scrolls away from me to half-hearted protests. She took out Malicia's scroll first, slapped it against a stone, and whet the quill. A stick figure with a crown atop it and three strands of hair was made to represent Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Aren't nobles supposed to get drawing lessons?" I jeered. "She's supposed to be the most beautiful woman alive."

"Right you are," Vivienne amiably agreed.

She wet the quill again and drew two circles over the stick figure's chest.

"There we are," the Princess said. "Like looking at a painting of her."

I snorted.

"All right, hit me with the other ones," I said.

Amadeus of the Green Stretch got to have a sword and a beard, the Wandering Bard got to hold an attempt in the direction of a lute. Akua Sahelian was drawn on fire, which I suspected to more of a wish on the artist's part than an accurate representation. They each got their stone, though unlike the Mavii raised stones the outcroppings here were low. I could see the horizon over them, the deep night sky beyond.

"I still think you should have a sheet for the nobles," Vivienne said. "Sepulchral's out of the running now that she's undead, but soon every remaining High Lord and Lady will be in Ater. At least *some* of them will be plotting to climb the Tower."

"I'm not planning to control who climbs the Tower," I said.

She glanced at me skeptically and I grimaced.

"I am," I conceded, "but only because it's accessory to what I'm actually after."

"Which is?"

"Who's going to dictate what Praes is, going forward," I said. "I'm not blind, Vivi. I know that my father might not actually want to take the throne. But that doesn't mean his philosophies can't rule."

She drew back, standing by the fire and taking a look at the parchments.

"Malicia has to die," the Princess said. "She's done too much to be left alive."

"I won't pursue if she crosses the Tyrian Sea," I agreed. "Anything else gets her a shallow grave."

"And Akua is not acceptable as Dread Empress," Vivienne said, a hint of warning in her voice.

I shrugged.

"Which is irrelevant, because she will not accept," I said.

I wasn't sure how deep the temptation would run, even now. I had my suspicions – she'd always seemed to think more in terms of legacy than titles, which was telling – but I couldn't *know*. Maybe the lure of power would make her blood sing, the idea that she might rule from the Tower at last. But I believed, bone deep, that when the moment came she would turn away. Recognize it as a cage made of everything she had grown to despise. And I was not wrong in this. *But if I'm wrong?* My fingers clenched. Assassin could not get to Malicia, protected by the Tower as she was, but Akua did not share in that safety. *But I'm not wrong.*

"Meanwhile the Carrion Lord is nowhere to be found and the Wandering Bard unlikely to be taken as a candidate for ruling the Tower," Vivienne said. "Why those four, then?"

"Malicia, Akua, Amadeus," I said. "They're the stories that Praes can embrace going forward."

Stasis, reclamation, reform. And each of them had enough sentiment behind them that they were genuine possibilities – Malicia's cause was plunging downwards at the moment, but that was not because her philosophies were disliked. It was because of chaos and mismanagement. Should she win in Ater and restore order, her reign might well continue for decades yet.

"I don't care if Sargon Sahelian himself becomes Dread Emperor," I said, "so long as he's following a mould I'm comfortable with. Hells, I'd take Marshal Nim if she made a move."

"You'd prefer the Carrion Lord, though," Vivienne said.

"Sure, I'd prefer the one man I can trust not to start a stupid war and to butcher anyone threatening the new peace," I drily said. "But he's playing his own game, so I'll not count on it."

Vivienne grimaced.

"It's too abstract a cause for soldiers to get behind," she said.

"Which is why I've been taking about deposing Malicia a lot and a little about helping up my father," I replied. "Easier to grasp."



She glanced at the last of the four sheets.

"And the Bard?"

"Didn't have that one, back in Iserre," I said. "She's the enemy, Vivienne. There's not a part of anything I plan that can go without an answer to 'what if the Intercessor intervenes?'"

"But what is it that she's after?" Vivienne asked.

"My corpse, for one," I said. "She's stated as much and I believe her."

My heiress looked startled.

"She outright said so?"

"I got a proper declaration of war from her," I said. "We're in this to the knife."

The dark-haired princess stepped away from the light, knelt before the sheet and wrote: kill Catherine Foundling.

"Beyond that I'm less certain," I said. "But I think she's here in Praes because she doesn't want me to get the east in order. She wants Hasenbach desperate, Hanno forced to the forefront."

"What would she gain from that?" Vivienne asked.

"Right now everyone's a closed door for her," I said. "She burned too many bridges, she's an enemy under the Truce and Terms and no one has an interest in letting her back in. If it everything goes to shit, though?"

"People are forced to consider whether she should not be bargained with again, should the alternative be death by Keter," the Princess mused. "Yet that won't work with everyone."

"Procer's collapsing," I said. "A lot of people are going to be willing to do some very stupid things when the defence lines finally break and it sinks in we're looking at the massacre of half the continent. She'll get enough tools to make it worth her while. Besides, compared to how she's a pariah now what does she have to lose?"

Vivienne conceded the point with a nod. Under 'kill Catherine Foundling' went 'prevent alliance'.

"And that's all?" she asked. "It does not seem so much."

"Which is why there's a third line," I said. "We're going to call it the hidden knife."

It went up, neatly written, and she glanced at me in a way that invited elaboration.

"She's after something else," I said. "It's too small a game for her otherwise. Killing me, screwing the Grand Alliance, it's big but not big enough. She doesn't work with plots that don't echo, she's never only about the immediate win."

"So the hidden knife," Vivienne said.

I nodded. She moved to the closest sheet, the one where a terrible drawing of Akua stood aflame.

"And what does *she* want?" the Princess asked.

I leaned back, going through my saddlebags to bring out a bottle of aragh. I ripped out the cork with my teeth, then spat it to the side.

"Try it," I invited, then took a drink.

The dark-haired princess stood with her back lit by the flames, milkmaid's braid crowned with a small circlet of silver. I watched her watch the parchment, glare at it as if it would surrender answers.

"She wants to take it back," Vivienne finally said. "Or close enough. I figure she'd settle for people just forgetting about it, if it were on the table."

"Redemption," I said. "That's the word you're looking for."

Vivienne turned a hard look to me.

"Cat, I know you're... whatever the Hells you two have been doing, but don't kid yourself," the Princess said. "You can't teach her to be a good person."

I couldn't even teach myself that, most the time, so that was hardly unexpected.

"You're thinking in House terms," I said instead. "Good and Evil, good people and bad people."

"If you're about to tell me there's no such thing as good and evil, you're going to need to get me drunker first," Vivienne said. "I still won't buy it, but at least I'll be drunk."

I snorted.

"Look, we're not really better than Praesi," I said. "When it comes down to it, Callowans are not less selfish or wiser or inherently better. That's probably the most important thing my

father ever taught me: most people do shitty things because they're in shitty situations."

"In an absolute sense you're probably right," Vivienne said. "And I think a lot of what's wrong with the Dread Empire can be traced back to hunger just as much as the nobility, but that's not really an excuse. Not for Akua Sahelian."

"You're still falling in the trap," I said, "of thinking about it as opposing ideologies. That's the thing, though: there's not really a philosophy of Evil the way the House of Light says there is. Jino-waza's probably the closest thing in Praes and it's not inherently bad. It just becomes that when it's paired with, you know, desperation and a taught disregard for others."

"Except Akua *has* been philosophically Evil," Vivienne objected. "The word is something Wasteland highborn embrace and the damage she did was under that banner. Crushing her rivals, taking the Tower, conquering the world."

"The Queen of Blades went conquering in all directions and we didn't call her Evil," I said. "And when Hasenbach made her rivals drink poison after the Great War, did the House condemn her? Let's not even talk about the amount of people I killed to become Queen of Callow. We shouldn't be hypocrites about this. It's the means that make it something different, Vivienne."

"And she used those means," the Princess bluntly replied.

"She did," I agreed. "There's no excusing or forgiving that. What I'm saying is that she's done evil and Evil things, but I don't believe she's fundamentally either because there's no such thing as someone who is."

Even the Dead King had made choices, known crossroads.

"And what would that change?"

"That she can be taught to understand that people are... people," I said. "Not just in the abstract but close-up. That's what it taught her, our campfires and the Army of Callow. That the sum of people existing in the world weren't Named and those with golden eyes."

"That's supposed to make a difference?" Vivienne scorned.

"Imagine you've been breaking statuettes of clay all your life," I said. "Going through them like a spendthrift to get your way. Imagine, one day, waking up to see they were made of *flesh and blood*."

Vivienne's face blanked. It was probably the cruellest thing I'd ever done to anyone, setting Akua on that path. She had begun with a ledger so filled she might drown in the ink.

"Redemption," I repeated. "That is the word."

This time Vivienne put it down without argument. She glanced back, silently asking for the rest.

"Reclamation," I said. "That is where her path led her. She hasn't renounced nobility, that's not who she is. She's grown disgusted with the worst parts of it, the scrapped iron she threw in Kairos' face. She wants to take the talents of the highborn and put them to better purposes, not to undo their rule."

It was a difference in the way we'd been raised, I thought. Akua had been brought up to see the aristocracy as the best of Praes, its foundation and virtue. I'd grown up thinking of them as parasites best gotten rid of. Unlike me, she did not consider a world stripped clean of nobles as having been *improved*.

"And the last?" Vivienne asked.

I smiled.

"Why do you ask?" I said. "It could be only these two."

She frowned.

"Is it?"

"No," I agreeably said. "But why are you so sure of that?"

She hesitated.

"It just... felt like there should be three," she admitted.

"Good," I said. "Your instincts are sharpening."

If she was to found a dynasty fated to end up Named as often as the Fairfaxes had, I'd be professionally offended should it not be better than most at namelore. She seemed as irritated as she was pleased by the compliment.

"So, the last?"

"Freedom," I said.

Vivienne looked at me in surprise, blue-grey eyes blinking.

"She *just* got loose after years with us," she said.

"Did she really?" I asked. "First she was bound, and when she was freed she found herself bound still."

I smiled harshly.

"Now she finds herself poised to take the Tower, and she realizes that the throne would be just another set of chains," I said. "And these most contemptible of all she has worn."

She'd be putting those on by herself, after all.

"Akua will be wanting a way out," I said. "Craving it."

And how fortunate for her that I already had one to offer. Freedom went up on the parchment, Vivienne applying herself so the letters would come out neat even though the stone beneath was uneven. She rose to her feet afterwards with an expectant look. Instead of answering it, though, I pointed a finger upwards. Vivienne looked up and went still in surprise. The moon was fully out, meaning we'd been at this for a while.

"You need to get moving soon if you want to be back to camp at a decent hour," I said.

She hesitated.

"This is important," Vivienne said.

"It is," I acknowledged. "But is it important to you?"

She looked a little offended at that.

"Of course it is," she replied. "I wouldn't let you-"

"That can't be the way you do things anymore, Viv," I quietly interrupted. "You know that. There are other things you have to put first."

Silence.

"I'm the Princess, you know," Vivienne Dartwick said. "Not the Queen. It doesn't need to change."

"You are the Princess," I replied, smiling, "until you are the Queen. So it's already changed."

She had duties now in a way she'd not had them before. Not even when she'd been my regent. A Name was a responsibility that could not be denied, not unless you wanted it to hurt you: Vivienne must act the princess now, else it would turn on her. And that meant not blowing off her duties so she could help with my own, much as the both of us would have liked her to. It was a lonely feeling, but I pushed it down. How long was I going to keep all my friends on a string, never more than a tug away? I might not like the feeling in my stomach, but I liked even less how accustomed I'd become to the people I loved taking everything on my terms. Vivienne sighed.

"We're getting old, aren't we?" she asked.

"I guess we are," I admitted. "We can't be nineteen and on the road forever. We wanted to change the world, Vivienne. It's why we fought so hard to climb."

"Only it's different when you're on top," she said.

A pause.

"I wonder if it was like them for them too."

I followed her gaze, the way it came to rest on the two sheets left untouched. Alaya of Satus and Amadeus of the Green Stretch. The two people who'd reformed Praes into what it now was, led it to its greatest heights since the days of Maleficent the Second before it fell into the pit where it was now stuck. I shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the coolness of the night. Neither of us had an answer, and so after sharing a drink with me Vivienne picked up her bags and saddled her horse. She rode away into the dark, leaving me with a mostly full bottle and more ghosts than I cared to entertain.

It would have been easier if Hakram were here, he would have stayed by my side. There wasn't really anyone else left, was there? Indrani cared little for this sort of thing, and I'd sent her out on a mission besides. Masego was allergic to scheming or near enough, and neither Juniper nor Pickler were really... fit for this sort of thing. Aisha might have done decently enough, but I wasn't going to abduct my own marshals' right hand because I didn't want to feel as lonely. I wasn't *that* pathetic. Even Ivah would have been appreciated if it weren't up north trying to keep Serolen from further collapsing.

Gods, I realized with startlement, but I even missed John Farrier. How long had it been since I'd thought about the man who had commanded the Gallowborne? The real one, not the one I'd cut up into small companies and spent across a dozen foreign fields. I drank of the bottle again, sitting by the fire, and idly reached for my staff. Without even turning to look I slapped it down, landing on the back of the creature that'd been creeping towards me. It was... a scorpion? No, not just that. It had black fur over the shell and a catlike head. It tried to wriggle away until I flared Night, at which point it dropped 'dead'.

"How very believable," I said, amused, and then turned. "Were you going to warn me?"

I glimpsed a blade being tucked back into Scribe's sleeve as she kept silent. I snorted. Was she pissy because I'd not let her make an entrance by nailing the critter with a knife? I glanced at the cat-scorpion, which had been looking at me warily. It dropped 'dead' again the moment it saw me looking.

"I take it there's news," I said.

"Sargon Sahelian has arrived," Scribe said.

I cocked my head to the side and waited. That wouldn't have been enough for her to come.

"There was a riot in the streets of Ater," she said. "Citizens clamouring for Malicia to be deposed. It was put down by the Sentinels."

I let out a low whistle. That was a euphemism if I'd ever heard one.

"My people in the city don't believe it was a natural occurrence," Scribe continued. "Someone incited it."

And there were only so many people with agents in the right place for that. Unfortunately most of them had an interest in seeing Malicia thrown out of the Tower, so that didn't exactly narrow down the list. I made myself look past the implied massacre to what it would mean.

"It weakens her position," I said. "In front of all the nobles she's brought to her gates."

Scribe nodded, adding nothing. She stayed there as my eyes drifted back to the parchments. I felt Eudokia hesitate, then carefully speak up.

"Survival," Scribe said.

I glanced at her.

"For Malicia's list," she elaborated. "More than anything else, Alaya of Satus wants to survive."

I hummed.

"So why is she still here instead of on a boat to Tyre?" I asked. "She could take enough priceless things and run that the fortune would last her for five lifetimes and I'd be near impossible to stop her."

"Because she still believes she can win," Scribe said. "And it's personal to her now, a matter of pride."

I studied her.

"Amadeus?"

"Not only him," Eudokia said. "All of us. The Calamities helped put her on the throne, so she never entirely felt like it was truly hers. Now she stands with all of them dead or turned

against her. If she does not win here, she proves her every doubt right: she never was meant to rule, and it was only the kindness of strangers that saw her climb the Tower."

I stayed silent for a long moment, considering.

"Write it down," I finally said.

She did not immediately move, asking a question with her eyes.

"Survival and Pride," I said. "And you better have brought a cup, Vivienne left with them."

"I'll see what I can do," Scribe drily said.

Her handwriting was beautiful, I thought, and impossibly perfect given the angle of her hand and the rough stone the parchment was hung on. A side effect of her aspect?

"The first?" she asked, having left the space empty.

"Stasis," I said.

Scribe cocked her head thoughtfully.

"That is an interesting interpretation of her reign," she said.

"You don't agree?"

"Regardless of our personal enmities, Malicia has been an able ruler and an effective reformist," Eudokia said. "Not all of her changes were of the Reforms – most weren't, in fact. The reason you have been able to trample over the High Seats with an army of fewer than twenty thousand is that she has spent decades bleeding them out. There was a time where Kahtan alone would have been able to field a host twice that size."

"I don't mean that she's trying to stop reforms," I said. "I'm sure she'd be constantly tinkering with the Empire, on the contrary. It's what at the core of her philosophy that's in stasis: her."

"Arguably, her philosophy as a ruler has been centralizing in Praes while using diplomatic means abroad," Scribe noted. "It was only when Hasenbach edged her out in Ashur even after decades of work that she began resorting to... traditional imperial foreign policy."

Doomsday fortresses and assassinations, she meant.

"You still misunderstand me," I said. "Sure she has strategies and policies and ideas. That's not the point. The point is that Malicia does not have a vision of Praes where she's not in charge of it."



I drank of the bottle, let the aragh burn down my throat.

"And I don't mean for a few decades," I said. "I mean forever. Malicia's not making an empire where the power rests with the Tower, she's making an empire where the power rests with *her*. She doesn't ever intend to give up that throne."

Scribe considered that.

"It would not be so unpopular a vision with most of Praes," she said. "The empire's peaks, the moments where it was wealthiest and most powerful, have generally come when an able tyrant held the Tower and concentrated power in their hands."

"If it were unpopular, it wouldn't be dangerous," I said. "And it's not like the vision is only hers now. High Seats noticed what she was doing, the way she was shaping the empire to make it easier for the Tower to stay in control. Gods Below, Scribe, she had an open rebellion in her heartlands for two years right on the heels of pretty much losing a war and she was still able to collect taxes from most of Praes. Everyone who's noticed is licking their chops and wondering what *they* might be able to achieve if they take over her machinery."

Stasis went up on the sheet. As if gathering courage, Eudokia abandoned the rocks long enough to pour herself a large shot of aragh in what I was pretty sure was an empty inkwell. She drank it down in a single breath, then squared her shoulders.

"Amadeus, then," she said.

"First one's easy," I said.

"Reclamation and stasis," Scribe mused. "For him, then, reformation?"

I smiled, nodding. We were both familiar with what my father's story for Praes would be. The High Seats humbled or destroyed, Ater unchallenged and the Legions of Terror the backbone of the empire. The only schools for mages under the Tower's aegis, local nobility broken and replaced by appointed governors, peace with Callow and assimilation of the forces on the fringes: the Clans and the Tribes. He'd cut out every part of Praesi culture he disliked and replace it with something he preferred. It was a stable and prosperous Praes he promised, but at the price of what was likely a decade of civil war after large swaths of the empire rebelled against his policies.

"Only that's the story, the ideology," I said. "In the here and now, he's up to something as well."

"Destruction," Scribe said.

The confidence in her voice caught my attention. I raised the bottle, inviting her to elaborate.

"He's never been particularly eager to rule," Eudokia said. "So long as he has free hand to push his reforms, in truth he prefers not to. It's why Malicia was able to trust him for so long. Even now he does not position himself for the Tower. Which means he is trying to achieve the same ends through different means."

I grimaced.

"You think he's going to swing an executioner's axe at everything he can't tolerate about Praes," I said. "Sweep the board clean."

"He will seek to destroy everything he believes a hindrance to a function Dread Empire," Scribe said. "That is my belief."

And she'd sold me on it. It made sense, with the only part tripping me up being that I still had a hard time believing he'd be willing to let the Tower fall into the hands of the people most likely to end up climbing it. Yet he'd made no claim of his own, gathered no armies to his banner. He was no closer to ruling Praes than when I'd last seen him, drunk and maudlin in Salia.

"There's more," I said. "Has to be. The methods he's been using are too odd otherwise. He's been back in the Wasteland for years while we fought out west, Scribe, he has to have been doing *something* all that time."

"He has been unusual in his approach," Eudokia admitted.

"And that means there's something else," I said. "An objective we haven't figured out yet, the reason he's been so strange."

Scribe looked at the parchments in the firelight, falling silent. I looked at her. I still had to fight it, **Fade**, but it was getting easier. And the more it fought me the more I could feel it. Her Name itself, but also the three candles within it. They felt close enough I could almost reach out. Not, not exactly that. It would be... harsher if I did it. Like an order. A scream, followed by silence. I only shook myself out of the daze when Scribe went still. She was looking at Malicia's sheet.

"Figured something out?" I asked.

She turned to me without missing a beat, tanned face pleasantly smiling.

"No," the Scribe lied.

Ah, I thought. *And there we are. The first conflict between old loyalties and where you now stand.* The victor was not unexpected.

"We leave it empty then," I said. "For now."

She rose to her feet, writing 'destruction' before withdrawing.

"What follows?" she asked.

"We figure out," I said, "where we give and where we fight."

"The Intercessor gives no grounds for compromise," Scribe noted.

"Which is why we're fighting her through the other three just as much as we're fighting them," I said. "Frankly speaking, my father's way forward is what I'd prefer but it'd be hard for most of Praes to swallow and he's still keeping cards close to his chest. We can aim for him, but we can't start there."

She eyed me strangely, holding back on a comment, then nodded.

"Akua Sahelian, then," she said. "Malicia is not acceptable to you."

"We're going to have to use Akua to topple Malicia," I agreed. "Which means getting her noble backing, since the Legions are unlikely to back her."

Scribe considered that.

"Assassinating some of the High Seats could create such an opportunity for her," she said.

"It's also risky," I said. "So we leave that aside from now. We know we want to use Akua against Malicia, but that doesn't mean Amadeus is going to stand aside and look. He's going after something, someone. We need to figure out what's that before we move."

"Given that nearly every prominent noble in Praes and most the middling ones are either in Ater or journeying to it, they seem the most likely target," Scribe said. "It would destroy much of what he disliked of the empire in a single stroke."

It might. It wasn't like killing the nobles would end their families, there'd be replacements, but the sheer number of dead nobles would throw their influence into chaos. With the High Seats dead and unable to keep their vassals in line, all the violence held back would flow and in that mess someone with a solid professional army – like, say, the Legions – would be able to decisively break the aristocracy's power if they moved quickly enough the nobles weren't able to get their affairs in order. Without gold and land and fortresses, Praesi highborn lost much of their danger.

"So we figure out how he'll do it," I said. "He doesn't have soldiers, just him and Ranger, so it limits the opportunities he can make use of. We find out what those are and we'll finally catch his tail."

"I'll see what I can do," Scribe said.

"We'll need people in the city when it comes to that," I noted. "Otherwise we can't act on the information. When Indrani comes back tomorrow we'll see about our options."

Callowans would stand out like sore thumbs trying to enter Ater discreetly, but I had Praesi officers in my ranks. Maybe not enough to make a strike force of killers, but there was another option to consider. How many people would be able to tell apart a Taghreb and a Levantine if the Levantine kept their mouth shut?

"That is a start," Scribe said. "But it does not explain how we are to ensure Akua Sahelian has overwhelming support among the nobility."

I cocked my head to the side. Sometimes it wasn't about winning, I thought.

"I know how," I said.

Eudokia turned a questioning gaze to me and I grinned.

"I'm going to lose a battle," I cheerfully told her, "and get betrayed."

## Chapter 24: Bequeathal

*"And so, her tribe burned around her, Matron Creaker stood in the ashes and spoke thus: 'Do you now think me cowed, Nihilis? I would have burned them myself, to be rid of you.'"*

– Extract from Volume VI of the Official Imperial Chronicles

I had goblin troubles.

A third of them I saw coming, in that the Confederation of Grey Eyries had been bound to come scratching at my door so I might win them some concessions at the peace table after Ater fell. They had good reason to think I'd back them when it came down to it. Callow had played a role in the creation of the Confederation from the start: the Matrons had begun sounding me out for support as soon as it came out in the open that Malicia were at odds, even if it'd not come to anything for years. It had been under Vivienne's regency and with Hakram's backing that Callow had funnelled the Tribes coin and steel so they might arm themselves for a successful rebellion, then promptly recognize the newly founded nation. I'd maintained the policy since.

We'd not done it for free, of course. After the Night of Knives, weakening Malica without outright starting a war had been one of the leading goals of the Kingdom of Callow and accomplishing it like this had probably been the greatest diplomatic coup of my

reign. The more immediate payoff, though, had been stocks of goods that only the Tribes could provide: goblin steel and munitions. The latter, in particular, had been necessary since the Army of Callow was still largely patterned on the Legions of Terror and their doctrine employed goblin munitions. The coin and steel we'd sent them had not been gifts, they'd been loans: the crown of Callow was to be repaid in goods.

It'd worked out more than decently, at first. The rebellion had taken the Tower by surprise and seized Foramen, taking control the imperial forges there and massacring the Banu – the noble line that'd ruled the High Seat. But then Malicia had gotten her affairs in order and sent Marshal Nim south with several legions, penning in the goblins choking out the convoys of goods they'd been sending us. We'd felt the lack of those starkly during the campaigns out west. Though in a decent position and dug-in, the Confederation had then been betrayed from the inside: Matron Wither of the High Ridge tribe, Pickler's own mother, had allied with other tribes to take the city from the Confederation.

She'd done this so she could return to Malicia's banner as the High Lady of Foramen, not only the first goblin nobility recognized by the Tower but the first High Seat in the history of the empire not to be human.

The situation down south had been a rough stalemate since. High Lady Wither was dug in behind her heavily warded walls and her initial trouble of riots in the streets had tapered off – due in part to the grain I'd traded her in exchange for goblin munitions at Scribe's suggestion – but she couldn't really venture far outside the city. The Confederation outnumbered her ten to one and the Grey Eyries were a hell to assault even for goblins, on top of another High Seat now eyeing up Foramen. High Lady Takisha had been considering reclaiming the city, it was said, to install a cadet branch of the Muraqib at its head. The Confederation was no better off, though.

The Tribes just didn't have the kind of army that'd be needed to take a High Seat in any way except the brutal surprise strike they'd first taken Foramen through. So instead they'd gone raiding into the hinterlands of Foramen until those were turned into a barren wasteland where no one lived, then settled into a sullen stalemate with High Lady Wither. There were frequent skirmishes over convoys and caravans headed to the city, but neither side was really in a position to score a decisive blow on the other and it'd shown.

Given that the Confederation of the Grey Eyries had been perhaps not an ally but certainly a partner to Callow since its founding, it was a given that they'd reach out to me now that matters were coming to a head in Ater. It wasn't like the *Praesi* were going to offer them a seat at the table, and the Matrons were canny old

witches besides: from where they stood, the political considerations that'd led Vivienne to back their rebellion had not changed. It was still in Callow's interests to weaken Praes and I still needed their goods for my armies, so when I received the Confederations' delegation their leader spoke boldly after I got her into my tent.

"We would like for Foramen to be returned to the Confederation in the final settlement," Matron Braider said. "Preferably along with Wither's head in a box."

Braider was young, my matron standards, which meant she was mostly wrinkled instead of entirely. Her eyes were a sharp orange and unblinking, her needle-like teeth tinted blue from the strange paste she kept chewing. Vivienne, seated by me, looked unimpressed.

"The Confederation has not contributed to this war," she said, "save through irregular trade. You ask a high price for goods already paid for."

"We don't expect you to do it for free," Matron Braider said. "I've been empowered by the Council of Matrons to offer terms. I believe you'll find supporting us worthwhile."

The terms she outlined afterwards were, to be honest, pretty tempting. Treaty obligation to provide a certain amount of munitions and goblin steel at a set price every year, right of recruitment in the Eyries for the Army of Callow, a mutual defence pact against Praes and a fixed take of the Confederation's tax income pledged to building Cardinal until the city was deemed finished by a committee of Grand Alliance members. Vivienne wasn't anywhere as tempted, but it was pretty obvious that it'd wasn't her they'd tailored that offer for. Braider stayed long enough to answer questions and specify details before taking her leave, leaving me alone with my successor.

"The mutual defence pact isn't a real concession," Vivienne immediately said. "If they get Foramen they need one with us else they risk losing the city to Praes the moment it's no longer riven by civil war."

"So we milk them for something else," I shrugged. "Force them to never sell more munitions to Praes than they sell us, maybe, or exempt Callowan merchants from some tariffs."

After the wars, if the goblins held Foramen it would become the gateway to the Grey Eyries and all the ores in the mountains. Callow did not usually need to import steel or silver, but we did have a chronic lack of gold mines on top of a few other useful metals we had to get through Mercantis. Foramen would have great need of grain, given its poor lands and newfound hostility with

most of Praes, so my subjects stood to make great profits there. Vivienne eyed me with some surprise.

"You're really willing to make this bargain?" she asked.

"I'm willing to entertain it," I corrected. "I'm not going to risk the peace I'm after for the fucking *Matrons*, Vivienne, but they're good terms. If I have an opportunity I might as well take it."

"I imagine whoever takes the Tower will have some issues with losing one of the empire's largest cities," the Princess pointed out.

"That'll depend on the strength of their bargaining position, I imagine," I said. "I'm not going to cram this deal down your throat, Viv – the defence pact would stay your problem long after I abdicate, for one – but we should at least seriously consider it."

The second third of my goblin problems, though, I expected a great deal less. Within hours of Matron Braider being settled in a corner of our camp, one of the phalanges interrupted me halfway through supper. Our scouts had caught someone claiming to be an envoy and brought them into the camp quietly, but they refused to talk to anyone save me. I went with a chicken leg still in hand, gnawing at the meat even as I sat down across from a young goblin. Thirteen, fourteen at most. A woman, but that was only to be expected if she was an envoy. Couldn't think of a lot of Matrons that'd entrust anything of importance to a mere male.

I glanced at the legionary behind her and nodded. The cloth over her head was ripped off, leaving a slightly dazed goblin of pale green skin with a frame large enough there was no doubt she was of a Matron line. I let her dark yellow eyes come back into a focus as I tore off all little more chicken. It was unpatriotic of me to admit it, but Praesi poultry was better than my own people's. Probably because of some terrible blood magic a few hundred years ago, but you couldn't argue with that tender flesh.

"So who would you be?" I asked.

"Trudger," she replied. "And you're the Black Queen."

"That I am," I replied, taking another bite. "What brings you to my camp, Trudger?"

"I have been sent as an envoy by my mother, High Lady Wither," she said.

I blinked in surprise. Wait, this was Pickler's sister? I didn't even know – no, of course she had sisters. Most Matrons had a dozen children, so that the weak seeds might be weeded out. It

didn't really mean the same thing for them it would for humans. Few of them would have the same father, not that fatherhood was concept goblins put any stock in. Most of their kind would have found it obscene for a male to have a role in the raising of children, even if he'd sired the child in question.

"Pickler's never mentioned you," I noted.

"She wouldn't, the bitch," Trudger flatly said. "Why Mother is so fond of her when she took the first opportunity to flee is beyond me, but we're not here to speak of thin blood. You were approached by the Council of Matrons, yes?"

Not much meat left on the leg, but I bit it off and swallowed.

"I'm always talking the Confederation," I said. "We're friendly enough."

"They'll have come begging for you to give them Foramen," Trudger smiled. "I am here to deliver the better offer."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Had a little talk with your mother not two days ago," I said. "She didn't seem so eager to bargain then. What's changed?"

"Malicia's cause is dying," Trudger frankly said. "The Warlock has been popular with the refugees for some time, but since the riots were drowned in blood many Aterans balk at supporting the empress. If she loses the capital, she has nothing left."

"Which has me curious why you're talking to me instead of Akua Sahelian," I said.

Trudger smiled thinly.

"I imagine you think very little of us," she said. "My mother and the Matrons. That we're all the same to you, Wasteland highborn made small and green."

"That's a leap on your part," I said.

But the first part, at least, was true. How could I think much of a pack of old women who spent a thousand Robbers like coppers at a fair every year? I couldn't fix everything in the world, I'd learned my limits, but there had been a time... I had not forgotten who I was clasping hands with, the nature of my 'friends'.

"We're hard, Black Queen, because the Eyries are a hard place," Trudger said. "Because the Dread Empire is a harder place still. But that doesn't mean we're *blind*."

Something burned in those yellow eyes that had me believing, for this moment at least, that she spoke from the heart.



"We know the difference between someone like the Carrion Lord and Abreha Mirembe," Trudger said. "You have known tyrants, Black Queen, but how often have your people been subject to them? We have, and that history is a thousand years of blood-curling screams. You want to know why we'd rather not deal with Akua Sahelian?"

Trudger bared pale, sharp teeth.

"You have proved you keep your word," the envoy said. "You proved, in Wolof, that you know restraint. And if we had half a chance, Black Queen, *we'd kill every single Akua Sahelian in this fucking empire.*"

I hummed, dropping the chicken bones into a stretch of shadow. Zombie liked to break them. I leaned back into my seat, then nodded.

"All right," I said. "Let's say you have me convinced you're dealing in good faith. What does your mother want, and what does she offer?"

"We want to keep Foramen," Trudger said, "and we want peace."

It was a little more complicated than that, in practice. High Lady Wither intended on staying part of the Dread Empire of Praes and sitting on her High Seat, she just wanted me to make her problems go away. To broker a peace between her and the Confederation and to extract guarantees from the Tower she wouldn't be put down the moment the Dread Empire was no longer preoccupied with civil war. I was on the fence as to whether these was harder to get done than what the Matrons had asked me: ceding territory was one thing, but Wither was asking me to end a goblin blood feud and meddle in the Tower's authority over its own affairs. I pointed out the latter, but Trudger pointed out in reply that I'd already promised Abreha Mirembe to guarantee her title until the war on Keter was over so evidently I was willing to meddle. Which, much as I disliked admitting it, was a fair point.

"All right," I said. "I know what you want. What makes it worth my while?"

If the Confederations' offer had been tailored for me, then this one was tailored for Vivienne. Oh, Wither threw me a sop early on in the form of guaranteeing her High Seat would never interrupt the sale of munitions to Callow and would itself sell us goblin steel from the forges, but the rest was very much up her alley. A treaty guaranteeing Foramen would never send provide troops to make war on Callow so long as Wither's line ruled it, goblin and Taghreb blacksmiths provided to help setting up royal forges in Callow and a secret treaty supporting Jacks operations in the Hungering Sands. The deal was arguably less risky than backing

the annexation of a major Praesi city, too, which would appeal to Vivienne.

The last thing she wanted after the last decade was for Callow to be dragged into more wars.

I didn't give Trudger an answer, nor did she expect me to. Neither did I release her back to her mother, instead stashing her away in my camp as far away as the delegation from the Confederation as I could. I asked Masego to set up wards to keep everyone out of her tent and tripled the guard around her, too, which was bound to be noticed by spies in my camp but couldn't be helped. The last thing I needed was for Matron Braider or her cohorts to find out Wither's daughter was my 'guest'. I stopped by the stables to toss Zombie a few bones, which she crunched with relish, but when I returned to my tent to take care of my correspondence and read through reports I found someone waiting for me.

The last third of my goblin troubles I would not have seen coming in a hundred years, because Pickler had never before shown so much as an iota of interest in the fate of her people.

"Should I even ask how you know?" I said, limping open to my liquor cabinet and taking out a bottle of pear brandy.

I didn't like the taste much, too sweet, but now and then I enjoyed having a drink of it. It was a way to remember a man I'd respected and detested but who'd died the same way he'd lived: trying to save others.

"I got it out of Masego," Pickler said. "It was only a guess, but Mother was certain to send someone after the Matrons did."

I gestured towards the brandy, and to my surprise she nodded. I poured her a cup as well before dropping down in my favourite seat. My Sapper-General drank of her brandy, letting out a happy noise at the taste.

"Better than what you usually drink," she said.

"An acquired taste," I said, speaking as much of the man as the liquor.

Pickler didn't bother to ply me with small talk, which I appreciated. It would have been horrifying unlike her, and honestly made me lose some respect for her character.

"What did they want?" Pickler asked.

"The Matrons want Foramen back," I said. "Your mother wants to keep Foramen. The rest is gilding."

She laughed, but it was a barren sound. Without mirth.

"Of course it's about Foramen," she said. "Why would they care about anything but the prize?"

I sipped at my drink, swallowing quick to the sweetness would not linger.

"She sent your sister Trudger," I said.

"Our youngest," Pickler said, sounding surprised. "She must have killed either Salter or Folder to be trusted with this."

A pause.

"Didn't think she had it in her."

"She didn't think much of you either," I noted. "Not exactly close, I take it?"

"I spared Salter when I had her on the ropes," she replied. "She took that personally since the two are enemies – they were raised by matron-attendants that hate each other."

"You never told me how you left the Eyries," I said.

She drank deep, then set down the empty cup with a sigh. She cocked her head at me and I gallantly filled it up again.

"In age, I was the fourth out of nine," Pickler said, then grimaced. "It's not that age matters, Catherine – we don't pick leaders for it – but it lets you make allies for longer. It's an advantage. I was one of those raised by my mother, since two of my elder sisters had already been given to matron-attendants. She was..."

A moment of hesitation.

"She was proud that I was food at things," she said. "Saw I had a talent with forces and maths, got three retired sappers to teach me. But she also wanted me to be other things, things I couldn't be."

"So you left," I said.

"The College was a way out," Pickler said. "They all wanted me to go, my sisters, because I'd have no allies even if I returned. Mother thought differently, said that there was worth in learning there and the allies that could be made. But I wasn't one of the greenskin slots for the College, Catherine. My tribe paid so I wouldn't be sworn to service. I was supposed to *come back* afterwards."

"I'm glad you didn't," I said.

"So am I," she snorted. "Gobbler, leaving the Legions to go back? Madness. Mother figured out I wouldn't during my second year, when I stopped answering her letters, but she couldn't stop paying without losing face. She tried to get people to pressure me, but that's how I got to know Nauk. He thought I was getting picked on by other companies so he brawled through three of them and the mages they'd bribed to help."

They'd been in the same company for two years at that point, I thought, but I wasn't surprised they hadn't known each other well. There were a hundred people in every company and it was common practice for fresher recruits to be spread out so no tenth would ever be too green.

"He was a romantic," I smiled. "As much as an orc can be."

"He was good," Pickler quietly said, "in a way that few of us are. I still grieve that. I'm glad you spoke for him at Sarcella, Catherine. I just wish we'd let him rest years earlier instead of dragging him back as that... thing."

I grimaced but did not disagree. Wekesa the Warlock had done what he could, but Summer flame wielded by one of its great nobles was no petty thing. There had not been much left of him to salvage.

"I thought it could be fixed," I said. "I thought a lot of things could be fixed, back in those days."

"Some still can be."

I leaned back into my seat, sipping at the last of my drink.

"I can't answer unless you ask, Pickler," I said.

She shook with something that might have been laughter, had there been amusement in it.

"I don't have anything to offer you, Catherine," she said. "I am not a High Lady or the Council of Matrons. The gold I have you have paid me, and my allies are your allies. I couldn't threaten to leave if refused even if I wanted to – where I would I go? The Army of Callow is my home."

"It doesn't always have to be hard coin and favours, Pickler," I quietly told her. "We can talk."

"Talk doesn't move the needle with you," Pickler said, and before I could reply raised her hand. "It's not scorn I speak. You are a queen, Catherine. You cannot act like other women."

"And yet," I said, "I'd like to hear you out anyway."

She drank of her cup, squared her shoulders.

"They're plagues," Pickler of the High Ride tribe said. "Both of them. The Matrons just want a hidden kingdom in the mountains with Foramen as a trade city and no imperial leash. The shit they'll get up to in the Eyries, Catherine, would make a devil shiver."

"The way I hear it, it's already no handful of roses," I said.

"You don't get let in on the real secrets unless you're a Matron," Pickler said, "but I... know things. The Tribes hold back on projects out of fear the Empire will notice and intervene. Wipe them out, even. Even now there's a lot of Matrons who think munitions should never have been revealed. And the Council is made up of monsters, but my mother's worse."

"She likes knives and backs," I conceded.

"She's a Matron," Pickler shrugged, as if that settled it. "But she thinks differently, Catherine. She wants to be the queen of our kind or ensure one of her daughters will be. It's why she wants Foramen: it's the lifeline of the Tribes. The ways my people are rich, ore and goods, they're not worth anything if they can't be sold to someone. So long as she has Foramen, she has them in the palm of her hand. And to get her way she wouldn't mind starving half our people to death from behind the walls of her city."

"I deal with terrible people all the time," I admitted. "I even backed Helike to prominence in the Free Cities because it'd put down Malicia's allies."

"They are tyrants, Catherine," Pickler said. "Leeches who drink the lifeblood of goblinkind to maintain their power and influence. And I know it is not like me to speak of them, of all they do, but I..."

She swallowed.

"I owe it," she said. "To him. Because he was right, when you spoke to us in Marchford. When I balked at your banner rising against the Tower."

Pickler met my eyes, the pale yellow unblinking.

"They kill us for sport."

She bared her teeth.

"Robber spoke true when he said they've gotten soft," Pickler said. "Look at them, darkening your doorsteps with deals they would have once sneered at. They've spent so many of us they can't even get their own dirty work done anymore. They ate each

other's tails until there was nothing left but open maws and anger."

"I can't topple them, Pickler," I said. "Not without a war I can't afford to fight."

"You don't need to," my Sapper-General said. "They did it to themselves. Do you think my people are *happy* they're being used like this? The Matrons, my mother, they only own us so long as there's nowhere else to go. And that's something you can change."

I blinked at her in surprise.

"You allowed the Snake Eater tribe into Callow," Pickler said. "Let more in. Let us build without Matrons to hollow us out, without Preservers to open our throats the moment we reveal of ourselves. And they will come, I promise you that. Already the Legions and the Army are a home to flee to, but if you open Callow? Entire tribes will leave their tyrant behind."

"If I grant lands to tribes, I'll have a rebellion on my hand," I frankly told her.

"*Don't*," Pickler fervently said. "Don't let us forge another closed kingdom within the kingdom. Let us into your cities, your countryside, your wilderness. Let us be part of something that *does not want to eat us*."

I flinched away from the intensity of her gaze.

"They'll hate you for it, the Matrons," she said. "For showing them they don't own what it means to be a goblin, that just buried every other way and called it guidance. And I know it's not what you want, not what Vivienne wants, that you have to think in kingdoms and favours and hard coin."

She finished her drink, set it down.

"But we've stood behind you, Catherine," Pickler said. "Not them, *us*. From the start, we've been with you. Sappers and soldiers and scouts, we've bled for you. And I won't say it's owed, because my people don't believe in debt, but I need you to understand that I loved Robber – more than I thought, more than I knew – but there are fifty thousand like him the Eyries that never managed to flee. That are stuck and lost and will never see the light of day, know what the sun and the stars look like or even feel the wind on their face. Not unless you offer your hand to them."

She left her chair, stood before me.

"I don't have anything to offer you," she said. "Nothing to bargain with. All I can say is *please*."

I pushed back my chair, half-risen even as my leg ached, but I was not quick enough to stop her getting on her knees.

"- help us," Pickler said. "Save us from ourselves, from each other."

"I-" I choked out, at a loss for words.

"I think you might just be the only powerful person in the world who cares, Catherine," she quietly said. "And I know you're a queen, that you can't afford to bend, but still I ask."

She smiled, heartbreakingly.

"Please," Pickler asked. "If not you, then who?"

I closed my eyes, almost short of breath. The stars were there, out in the black, but they felt... distant. Fading.

I had goblin troubles.

## Chapter 25: Fool

*"And so Dread Emperor Irritant addressed his Chancellor thus: 'You have moved me through argument, so I crown you in my stead. May you rule wisely.' The day after the royal banner of Callow was seen, and soon Ater was under siege."*

– Extract from Volume IX of the official Imperial Chronicles

The first dart came from my left and I caught its glint in the morning light.

I clawed Night across the air, making a shield, but the one thrown a heartbeat later from my right I didn't see at all until a phalange moved in the way with her shield raised. It didn't help. Night shattered the first dart, but the second punched through steel like it was paper and then went on halfway through the orc's skull before stopping. And it wasn't even, I realized a moment later, the real attempt on my life. I was warned by shouts and the sound of crossbows being fired. *Behind me*, I thought, and turned to see a small creature leaping towards at my back. Hairy and clawed, like a toad gone wrong, but my staff was in movement and it was not quicker than me.

The side of the length of dead yew caught the creature in its distended belly, but it let out a high-pitched screech and spat out a yellow tongue that looked like a muscle. I saw something like bone at the end of the absurd length and threw myself to the side, but a legionary had come too close and he was in the way. Heavier than me. It was luck that got a fold of the Mantle of the

Woe just close enough I was able to pull it closer to my body, covering my side in time for the bonelike stinger to slide off the enchanted cloth. I snarled, as much about the legionary who'd almost just gotten me killed trying to protect me as in anger. Night cascaded down the length of my staff in strings that crisscrossed the creature's entire body in the span of a heartbeat before turning *sharp*.

Chunks of flesh and gore splattered the grass and I breathed out, eyes scanning for other threats.

The assassins that'd thrown darts at me had been tackled down but there seemed to be no more of the creature, which – shit, the corpse was dissolving into the ground. Ichor. That thing had been a devil. What the fuck was going on with our wards? I spared a look for the phalange that'd take a dart for me, grimacing as a hand over her mouth told me she was dead.

"Take them alive," I shouted.

It was no good, though, I saw moments later. The assassins – garbed in regular's armour – had stopped moving because they were dead. Poison, most likely. I'd be getting no answers out of them save through necromancy, and maybe not even that. There were alchemies that made corpses near-impossible to raise, and though they were expensive I somehow doubted that whoever had arranged this was lacking in funds. I rose back to my feet, closing the orc's eyes. She'd taken that dart for me without hesitation, and if she hadn't I would most likely be dead. *Fuck*, I thought breathing out. This wasn't the first attempt on my life, but it'd been a while one had come so close to succeeding. If that tongue stinger hadn't been meant to deliver a particularly nasty poison, I'd eat my shoes.

I got my people moving to cover the security breaches, because there was no way a devil should have been able to cross our wards. Before the hour was out the phalanges had caught most of our traitors alive, two trying to pull a runner towards Ater before being shot in the back. Enough confessed without need for... firm interrogation that I got a picture of what had happened. A few of my soldiers had been turned either by threats to their families or petty bribery, which had allowed a pair of mfuasa mage infiltrators in through our defences. They'd used illusions and murder to let in a summoned devil through the wards and make their attempt before being put down.

"They went for enlisted, not officers," Vivienne said. "Not all of them Praesi, either. Two of the flipped soldiers were from Summerholm."

I grimaced.

"This one wasn't a warning shot," I said. "They meant business."



"It won't be the last either," the Princess said. "You've provoked the High Lords enough a single failure won't put them off."

"You don't think this is Malicia?" I asked.

"It could be the Eyes," she conceded, "but I have my doubts. They don't usually use either devils or mfuasa."

Which might be the point, putting us off the trail, but I wouldn't argue the point. I'd certainly angered enough of the Wasteland's aristocracy that they were as likely of an author for this nasty little surprise. I clenched my fingers. Time to make a point of my own, then. I'd need to speak with Scribe, and Archer as soon as she got back. She was a day late, at this point, but I wasn't worried: I could still feel her star and the way it was moving towards us. She'd be there by noon.

"We'll retaliate," I said. "

"I expected as much," Vivienne said. "And our traitors?"

"We have a punishment for aiding the enemy in our regulations," I said.

My successor made a face but she did not disagree. It might have been a Legion regulation, originally, but Callowans were not much softer on treachery.

They'd be stoned.

—

Archer dragged her carcass back into camp an hour past Noon Bell, immediately heading for my tent when she did. She stank of dust and sweat but I still poured her a glass of lemon water when she dropped into a seat with a sigh, sending one of the phalanges to get her warm food. Indrani drank greedily, emptying the whole cup before letting out a sigh.

"Gods, the things you send me to do," she said.

I dropped into a seat across from her own, lowering myself slowly so my leg wouldn't ache too much.

"Thought you were all about travelling," I said.

"Ater was damned interesting," Indrani admitted. "Wouldn't have minded staying a little longer to see the sights. There were... complications, though."

"Ominous," I praised. "You've been working on your pauses, I see."

She preened.

"I have," Indrani said. "I keep using them in random sentences, it drives Zeze crazy."

I swallowed a grin. Amusing as that sounded, I had sent her out on an important errand.

"Report," I ordered.

She leaned back into her seat, grinning in a way that did not bode well for whatever poor bastard I'd make transcribe this later, and only stashed that insolence away long enough to thank the young man that brought her a plate of greens and stew with slices of rye bread on the side. Archer wasted no time dipping her bread and scarfing down an entire slice, almost choking as she slapped her chest twice.

"Right," she gasped. "So report. Got into their noble camps no trouble, their security is *horrendously* bad. The outer parts, anyway. They ward to the Hells and back little sections where the important people sleep, couldn't get in those. Stayed long enough to learn that our buddy Sargon is here now, with a small escort."

"Good to know," I grunted. "We'd figured as much, but it's good to have it confirmed."

"It shouldn't be too hard to get a strike force in Ater the same way I went in," Archer continued. "Lots of servants and peddlers go back and forth through the gates every day, the Legions don't actually watch them all that closely. The problems start in the city."

"Heard through sources that Malicia's pretty much lost grip," I said.

"Yeah, she's not real popular at the moments," Indrani snorted. "The Sentinels followed up massacring rioters by being just as hard with a few attempts by people to get at imperial granaries, which didn't win her any admirers."

Unfortunate timing for her, that. I didn't disagree with taking a hard line over food reserves with a siege possibly looming, but it was becoming clear that the Sentinels weren't the kind of tool that could be used for delicate work.

"So who's rising?" I asked.

"Akua," Indrani frankly said. "She's the city's darling at the moment. They're convinced she's the only person that can beat you and she's been making all the right moves – she'd been healing people, setting up hospitals and shelters and organizing the refugees. Even the *gangs* like her, Cat, it's ridiculous. They

started patrolling the districts the city guard won't go in anymore after she asked them."

I let out a low whistle.

"So she's making a play for the Tower," I said.

"Maybe," Archer said, wiggling her hand. "She hasn't actually gone there since coming to the city, way I hear it. She's got this mansion that's become like a second imperial court. There's already a song about the 'empress in the tower and the empress in the city'. Whatever she's up to, though, she hasn't actually made any moves to depose Malicia. Most people figure she's either still working on getting the Legions on board or there's some sort of clever plan afoot."

"I don't see the Black Knight flipping her way even if Malicia's star is waning," I said. "They get on terribly, by all reports, and Nim's a Legion loyalist. Without the army on her side, Akua will need major noble support before she can make a move. Won't have enough troops otherwise."

Support that I intended to deliver right into her hands, but was still in the making. It'd have to wait until Abreha and Jaheem Niri arrived.

"Could be," Indrani shrugged. "Went to have a look at the defences like you asked, and it's exactly like Juniper figured. They have a skeleton garrison on the walls facing us and the rest of the troops are at barracks in the nearby districts."

It was the only sensible way to defend a city the size of Ater with forces as small as the Black Knight's. She couldn't really afford to man the entire set of walls facing us, not with solid numbers, so she'd post just enough up there and keep her real numbers near streets that could be used to quickly mobilize. That was she could be sure her soldiers were where the fighting was actually happening when we attacked. Against a less seasoned commander the trick would have been drawing those troops out by an attack on the wall and then sending a smaller force to climb an unprotected stretch while the defenders were busy, but that wouldn't work on Marshal Nim. She'd keep companies in reserve.

No, like Juniper had said the only real way for us to take the city by force was speed. We needed overwhelm the walls before the Legions could fully mobilize, smash them while they were still separated and take up solid defensive positions before the highborn armies could intervene.

"Good," I said. "Did you get anywhere close to the Tower?"

"Nah, they've locked up those districts *tight*," Indrani said. "The Sentinels have been moving wagons around, though, so I'd bet

Malicia's opened up the vaults for a few things. Couldn't get into the Tower itself, though, not even through Scribe's underground routes. They're either closed or swarming with guards."

"Ime knows her trade," I sighed. "And my father?"

"That," Indrani grinned, "is where it gets... complicated."

"Now you're just overusing it," I chided.

"Fuck... you, Your Royalty," Indrani eloquently replied. "So, I went around looking for ye ol' Carrion Lord like my boss – terrible woman, you know, couldn't recognize a good dramatic pause even if it bit her in the ass – asked. I was prowling rooftops and alleys like a majestic panther, but then I got shot in the shoulder."

"You *what* now?" I replied, alarm.

"Don't worry about it, shallow wound, all in good fun," Archer dismissed. "So since the Lady had said hello, I set fire to the house she was standing on to say hi back and we had a good laugh about it. Only that, uh, drew some invited guests."

"Sentinels?"

"Please," Indrani snorted, "like I'd worry about *those*. No, I was asking her why there was some gray in her hair now like an old granny – there wasn't, always pisses her off when I ask anyway – but then suddenly there was just this guy there."

"This guy," I repeated, skeptical.

"Yeah, just standing there," Indrani agreed. "So I was all like 'what gives, did you maybe not notice that building is still on fire, you jackass' and then he turns to me saying 'Black Queen vassal. You are spared. The debt is paid. Leave.' You know, like an asshole."

"Indrani," I patiently said, "did you pick a fight with the fucking Emerald Swords?"

She blinked at me, surprise.

"No, of course not," Archer assured me. "Though that was obvious from the context."

I narrowed my eyes at her.

"I picked a fight with the Emerald Swords *and* the Lady," she proudly told me.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, feeling the headache coming. I wasn't even in pain yet, I could just sense its looming person like a fucking storm on the horizon.

"He'd told me to leave, see, so I did the only rational thing a woman can do in that position," Indrani began. "I-"

"-shot him in the eye," I finished.

"I did," she said, pleased, then leaned forward. "Twice. And I'll level with you here, Catherine, he did *not* enjoy that."

"Go figure," I said. "Ranger?"

"Kicked him into the fire when he was distracted and pulled down the house on him," Indrani said. "Shot her in the shoulder but she caught it and threw it back – almost took my eye out – but then the rest of the Emerald Swords arrived and it got messy."

"It *got* messy?" I drily said.

"Right, 'cause we drew a bit of attention so the Tower dropped a demon on us," Archer said. "Beast of Hierarchy, I think. Anyways the air started burning like oil and it spread fucking everywhere – no smoke, though, pretty weird right? – so I stabbed this elf in the back, 'cuz he was basically asking for it, and I maneuvered backwards from the situation."

She smiled proudly at me, the horrid wrench.

"You know, like a strategist," Indrani said. "Which I am."

"Tell me we don't have a demon-tainted Emerald Sword to deal with now," I said.

"Nah, everyone made it out," Indrani said. "Except for the diabolists Ranger shot, I guess, but if I learned anything in our years together it's that diabolists don't really count."

Yeah, and there it was. The goddamned headache.

"Anything else?" I asked, against my better judgement.

She considered that for a moment.

"I'm hungry," Indrani shared.

I sighed.

"About your... adventure, I mean," I said.

"Hey," Archer complained. "If *I* can't do the pauses, then you can't either. And what happened to us, Catherine? You never ask how my day went anymore."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"How did your day go, Indrani?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," she smugly grinned, shovelling a large spoonful of stew and greens into her mouth.

"How is that that I've met people who've literally eaten the souls of the innocent and somehow you're still the worst person I know?" I asked, reluctantly impressed.

"Natural talent," she told me through half-chewed greens.

There was nothing like spending time with my closest friends in the world to make me reconsider my position on people not being born terrible. I hid a smile, though, and drummed my fingers against the sculpted tabletop.

"It's a good thing that you're back," I said. "You can rest now."

"Sleeping in a bed will be nice," she agreed.

"You'll have to do it now, though," I idly said.

She stopped eating, staring at me.

"I've got a job for you," I pleasantly smiled. "You're going back into Ater."

"I was just *in* Ater," she whined.

"Yeah, but last time was too easy," I said. "So this time I'm sending you back with about forty handpicked Dominion warriors."

She wouldn't stay with them once they were in the city – anything a Named was involved in the Intercessor would know about – but that was all right, I had a different task in mind for her. Ater was no Wolof, after all, for all its formidable defences. It had fallen more times than I could count through the many centuries of imperial history.

Most of the time, from the inside.

—

It was another six days before High Lady Abreha Mireembe of Aksum – formerly empress-claimant Sepulchral – and High Lord Dakarai Sahel of Nok joined their forces to my own army. Most of their sizeable combine force had marched our way, a solid fourteen thousand. Abreha's reins on it were nowhere as tight as before though, since the Nok soldiery now had their own liege lord along instead of simple kinsman in command. Within moments of getting them in my tent I saw the tensions between the two of them. High Lord Dakarai, a gracefully aged older man with silvery hair and

the most golden eyes I had seen of any Praesi noble, now resented the woman he'd backed for the Tower.

I even knew why. One of the foundations of their alliance had been the marriage between Abreha's then-heir Isoba and Dakarai's daughter Hawulti, but from the High Lord of Nok's perspective he had mismarried his favourite daughter: Isoba's position as heir to Aksum was now up in the air. Mind you, Dakarai was here instead of talking with High Lady Takisha and the others for a good reason: it was too late for him to move to Malicia's camp. Even if she accepted his allegiance he'd get nothing out of the switch and he was more than a little likely to get assassinated as an example down the line. Malicia couldn't accept his return, anyway, not as things stood.

Too many of her 'loyal' lords had spent years waging war against Nok in her name, they wouldn't accept a peaceful return to the Tower's cause. If the High Seat returned to Malicia, it would be over Dakarai Sahel's dead body and for obvious reasons that would not be terms acceptable to him.

"Your hospitality remains pleasing, Black Queen, but you asked us here for a reason," Abreha eventually said.

"The wards against eavesdropping were something of a hint, I imagine," I snorted. "Fair enough. I want something of you."

High Lord Dakarai studied me calmly.

"Should you want Nok's forces to take the vanguard in breaching Ater, there will be a price for it," he plainly stated.

"Nothing so uncouth," I said. "On the contrary, I think you'll actually like this one."

I explained exactly what I wanted out of them, and they listened with faces like masks.

Afterwards, Dakarai Sahel left my tent in a rage and Abreha Mirembe lingered a little longer before following him out of the camp. I let them go, instead calling my war council together.

We had a battle to prepare for.

—

I pressed down against Zombie's back, squinting under the heavy glare of the afternoon sun.

The enemy was moving slower than I'd thought they would, though that was of my own making. Between Assassin, Archer and the Silver Huntress about twenty high-ranking nobles had been killed this morning. Among those we'd even caught two Muraqib and a Niri, the prize of the lot being High Lady Takisha's husband.

Just after that anthill got kicked the Army of Callow had begun marching at a brisk pace, circling Ater to the north and advancing on the camp of the noble private armies. Much as we'd expected it would, though our advance had been almost immediately seen and reported it'd still taken them long to organize. I suspected they'd prepared a makeshift command system in case we did attack them, but the wave of assassinations had upended that arrangement before it could be used. So while the nobles fought over who would lead and who would take the frontlines, the Army of Callow had marched effectively unchallenged.

Juniper didn't like the plan, but I'd sold her on the necessity of it so she'd put her talents to work making the best of the inevitable risks. While the Army of Callow and the Akusm contingent was moving to the north of the city, about five thousand – all Nok forces – under High Lord Dakarai were circling the city's belly to the south instead. The route was slightly longer, and I could see from above that the Black Knight had taken the bait. Seeing a smaller force split from our main host, Marshal Nim had ordered one of the southern gates open and sortied against it. The temptation to try to defeat us in detail had been too strong.

Without knowing it, the Black Knight had been courting disaster. The Nok wavemen, the famous archers I'd yet to see prove their worth on the battlefield, were served up exactly the kind of fight they shined most in: flat open fields against slow-moving infantry. Those enchanted bows proved to be brutally effective tools of war at a range at least one time and a half of standard-issue crossbows, arrows touched with magic coming down in a rain that tore through even the testudo formation of the enemy legionaries. Still, there were only a thousand of those elite archers and Nim soon had field scorpions brought out so the slaughter didn't last forever.

It still cost the Legions a few hundred soldiers for little gain and blunted their sortie. The Nok forces kept moving east towards the nobles with only paltry losses and the Legions did not attempt pursuit. No doubt the Black Knight was wary of getting another mouthful of volleys before Dakarai retreated again and the game began anew.

Up north, the shape of a battle began to fall into place. The enemy commanders were thinking along the same lines as the Black Knight, they too preferring to fight our army split. It'd made them take a gamble: instead of staying in their camp, a decent enough defensive position, the lumbering host of thirty thousand was marching *towards* the Army of Callow and its auxiliaries. The general facing Juniper had decided to bet that the battle against our main army would be won or lost before High Lord Dakarai finished circling the capital and fell on their backs. From up here I could see another trap, too, this one more subtly laid: at



the speed they were advancing, the noble armies would be meeting my own about at the height of one of the northern gates of Ater.

Cheeky, that. They were hoping that Marshal Nim might see an opportunity when the battle had begun to flank us from there. And more than that, I eventually decided. If the Black Knight opened the gates, the nobles could then retreat through it and into the city afterwards. Neither me nor the nobles were interested in fighting to the death while Malicia was watching us from atop the Tower like a waiting vulture. It'd be more sensible to allow whoever got the worst of the fighting to retreat, be it us or they. *Even with an army marching towards you*, I thought amusedly, *you're more concerned with the Tower than the steel*. A shame for them it wouldn't pan out this way.

An hour before Afternoon Bell the skirmishes began north of the city and I got involved. I made a few passes on Zombie and left trails of blackflame behind, leaving our Levantine skirmishers with a decisive advantage. An hour after that, the skirmishers retreated and battle lines formed. To the south of the city, though, High Lord Dakarai had slowed. It might be taken for resting his men, who had been marching for hours in the sun with enemies nipping at their heels, but it wasn't. To a practised eye, he was making sure he wouldn't be there for the battle to the north.

It didn't matter to the rank and files on both sides, who advanced with shields raised as sorcery and arrows began to fly. Hierophant ripped through enemy rituals – Akua didn't seem to be out there waiting to match him – so the volleys weren't *too* badly against us, and we closed the distance with only slight casualties. *That* turned into a massacre almost immediately. The nobles had put their levies in front and my legionaries chewed through them like a knife through butter. I was pretty sure the immediacy of that took even the enemy by surprise, because they answered by hammering at where their own lines met mine with rituals and that was hardly standard tactics even for the most wasteful of Wasteland lords.

It was a mistake, anyway. Getting columns of flame and clouds of poisonous smoke tossed at them by their own lords without the protections that my priests afforded the Army of Callow was enough to turn the fear of the levies into terror, which resulted in a small and then general rout. The household troops behind them were made of sterner stuff and tried to keep them in place, but that was like trying to ride a panicked horse: they got kicked for it, and hard. To my dismay, it looked like we were actually going to win this battle. Fuck. I'd badly overestimated the morale of the levies, and so had our enemies. My eyes flicked to the northern gates, waiting for them to open, but while Marshal Nim had reinforced the walls she kept them closed. Malicia's orders? I could only guess.

It was Abreha Mirembe who salvaged it. She'd been half-heartedly serving on the flank of the Army of Callow, fighting off the Kahtan tribal troops with a suspicious lack of rituals being thrown by both sides, when she saw the rout and ordered a general retreat of the Aksum army. I could see the dismay and fury flicker through the ranks of my men at the sight, High Lady Abreha's order creating a massive gap that the enemy lines plunged into without hesitation. It was a strange sight, from above: the enemy centre and left were collapsing before the Army of Callow, but my own left had walked off the battlefield just on the eve of victory and so the enemy right was coming hard towards a formation unprepared for it.

I swooped down to stem the tide, carving a wall of blackflame through the Kahtan tribal levies that stopped them cold in their advance. It bought the time for Juniper to do as we'd planned and call a retreat, just as at last the northern gates of Ater began to open. Nim was, unfortunately, too late to the party. The Army of Callow began to pull back, its enemies too far or in no state to pursue, and as Zombie rose back into the sky I breathed out in relief. It might have worked out even better than I'd intended, in the end. Abreha Mirembe had not just turned on me, she'd betrayed me just as I was about to win the battle: it would win her a great deal of esteem. Good. It'd make her betrayal and High Lord Dakarai's that much more believable.

Neither of them were in a position to go over to Malicia's side, after all, but it was not to the empress' banner they had flocked today. Why, they had just announced their support for the cause of Akua Sahelian by saving the entire goddamned capital.

And with that, the fall of Ater could begin.

## **Interlude: A Tower No One Could Claim**

*"You ask me why I never sought to claim the Tower. I ask you in turn: what great sin have I wrought, that I would deserve such a punishment as to hold it?"*

– Kayode Owusu, Warlock under Dread Emperors Vindictive I and Nihilis

Akua's shielding spell snapped in place just in time for the stone to bounce off it, rolling on the street as behind her the wall finished collapsing ahead of her. The horses had been spooked by the noise, but she was a skilled enough rider to keep her mount from acting out – some others were not, a few youths even being thrown off. A second look told her that no one seemed to have died, which made this one of the least lethal assassination attempts she'd ever been subjected to. That made it all the more ironic this had been the closest anyone had gotten since she'd come to Ater. The golden-eyed sorceress set aside the

thought, shifting in her saddle to welcome the presence of the man riding up to her side.

"That seems a little *too* unfortunate an accident," High Lord Jaheem idly said.

"It was no such thing," Akua replied.

He shot her a considering look.

"You reined in your horse before the wall broke," he noted.

"For the same reason I know it was not an accident," Akua said. "I caught the scent of demolition charges."

And she knew the scent well. There had been a time where Special Tribune Robber had delighted in rubbing just enough powder in parts of her tent that the smell would stick and her subconscious mind wouldn't allow her to untense. If she'd actually needed to sleep as a shade, it would have driven her to a breakdown in a matter of months. The goblin had been an artist in matters of malignance, for all his generally unpleasant demeanour. High Lord Jaheem was impressed, though he should not have been or at least have hidden it better.

"Her Dread Majesty or Wither herself, then," Jaheem Niri mused. "A heady compliment."

Akua smiled, more at his reference to the famous line from 'Maleficent the Great' – *if a woman is to be known by the quality of her enemies, is it not a heady compliment to be at war with all the world?* – than the flattery. The High Lord of Okoro was known as a well-read man, fond of theatre and the classics. He'd continued to attend public theatre even after enemies tried to kill him at such performances twice.

"Wither. This isn't Malicia's sort of knife."

High Lady Takisha Muraqib of Kahtan had cut into the conversation with what some might consider rudeness, but though High Lord Jaheem dislike her he let the affront pass without comment. It was not the first time and he was not the first to do so. Takisha's face had grown hard and her temper foul since the Assassin had slain her husband. She'd been fond of the man, overly so by the standards of proper nobility.

"It seems the more likely of the two," Akua conceded.

Sappers had done this, or at least people with sapper training. Trying to kill her with a collapsing wall required delicate timing and knowledge of goblin munitions that few who had not been in the Legions possessed.

"You always see goblin hands behind everything," High Lord Jaheem scorned. "And no wonder why. If you had your way we'd break our armies in the Hungering Sands so your thirdborn can rule Foramen under you."

"Matron Wither was part of the rebels that seized the city and exterminated the Banu," High Lord Takisha flatly replied. "Of course she needs to be deposed, it was a mark of Malicia's decline that it was ever otherwise. And as for rule, well, who has the blood for such a title now save the Muraqib?"

Akua understood well the nature of this conversation and the hundred others like it she had heard over the last two weeks. Malicia's fall had been considered set in stone – ah, foolishness – even before two High Seats had defected from Catherine's cause to Akua's – highly dubious – so instead of scheming to seize the Tower the highest of the highborn were now fighting over another prize. Namely, who was to be Akua's own Chancellor when she became Dread Empress. It was considered natural and self-evident that a Sahelian of the old blood would end the *absurd* decree making it high treason to hold or claim such a Name, regardless of Akua never having made such a promise.

So now the vultures showed off their plumage with little displays like this conversation, pecking at each other's heads so that one might emerge as the natural candidate to be Akua's treacherous right hand.

"High Lady Wither can wait," Akua said, tone a tad short. "We came here for a reason."

She spurred her horse forward, keeping her irritation away from her face. Such politicking did not make her kind better or worse than any other highborn of Calernia. She knew this. It still stuck in her throat that the High Seats would continue these games without batting an eye when a battle had very nearly been lost to the Army of Callow the day before, thousands of levies been mercilessly mowed down. Some of the lords and ladies on the field had been embarrassed by the way their conscripts had broken, but it was not the farmers and traders in shoddy armour that Akua was embarrassed of.

What worth, what pride was there in dying on a field for someone who would not bat an eye at continuing to scheme before your body had finished cooling?

Yesterday's wounded had been allowed into the city against the Empress' orders, though not the rest of the private armies, and considering how undermanned the capital's defences were it had seemed sensible to both Akua and the Black Knight that empty barracks be turned into makeshift hospitals. She'd had to fight tooth and nail with the same nobles who claimed to support her to organize a rotation of mage healers that would see to everyone

instead of simply each lord's own wounded – if even that – and it was only after Marshal Nim shamed the entire nobility of the Wasteland by sending Legion healers first that finally they gave in.

It would have been a public embarrassment otherwise, and once again Akua's reputation rose with the nobility for having had the 'foresight to try to spare them such a thing'. She'd bit her lip in frustration until she could feel blood against her tongue. Every time she thought she had finally found the thread she could pull at to undo the knot, she found instead that she was tightening the noose. How long would it take, before she felt the rope around her neck and there was no choice left save the drop? Her fingers closed around the reins at the prospect. They wanted to make her empress. Dread Empress Magnificent, Akua had once fancied she might be called. She'd had plans, dreams. Now it was all within hand's reach and she felt only fear for what she might have once acclaimed a triumph.

Her ever-present shadow led his horse to her side, leaning close.

"They would burn this entire city and all in it for power over each other," Kendi whispered. "It is only a matter of time until instead they burn *you*."

Akua looked up at the stormy skies, the clouds roiling high above around the Tower. They were never far. The honest words of a man who hated her, who wanted the worst for her, had become oddly soothing. She could count on Kendi Akaze to be exactly what he claimed to be, and that was a startlingly precious thing of late. Their party made good time to the northern districts, where a token force of legionaries kept an eye on the barracks now filled with the wounded and the dying. Akua had already spent hours there this morning, but it was not for the living she had now come. Instead she rode further still to the great plaza where oil-drenched wood rose in great piles.

Above those waited corpses, thousands of them.

High Lord Dakarai Sahel, who along with Abreha Mireembe had already been there, sought her company.

"It was cleverly done, arranging for the bodies to be brought here," the High Lord of Nok said. "There are not many occasions aside from court where we would all gather, but who could afford to miss this?"

"It might have been for the best if you did, Dakarai," High Lady Takisha cut in.

Akua's brow rose ever so slightly. Others would make allowances for grief, but Takisha was being unusually bold today. Interrupting not one but two conversations with peer nobles? Akua

herself might find offence in that, not just the High Lady's rivals. *You have something afoot*, the sorceress thought. *You are willing to risk my irritation now because you believe your boldness will pay off elsewhere soon and my memory of irritation will be transmuted to appreciation in retrospect.*

"Takisha," the High Lord of Nok gently said. "My condolences."

The other woman's face slacked with surprise.

"It must be galling, owing your life to Abreha and I," he continued.

Surprise turned to fury and mentally Akua tallied a strike on Dakarai's side of the board. It'd been an elegant bit of cruelty, turning implied condolences for her husband's death to an open slap in the face. Takisha replied with a weaker barb about the Ashuran sack of Nok before beating a retreat, not because she was cowed but because she was having difficulty controlling her anger. Golden eyes turned to the High Lord of Nok, who was smiling pleasantly.

"I have a question, my lord, if you will," Akua idly said.

"I have sworn to see you climb the Tower, my lady," Dakarai replied. "I would deny you nothing, much less a question."

"That is pleasantly to hear," she smiled. "You will not mind, then, telling me what Catherine planned when she ordered you to betray her."

He looked at her with convincing surprise.

"Caution is only to be expected," High Lord Dakarai regretfully said, "but I will convince you of my sincerity in time. I had hoped that saving your cause on the field yesterday would win me some trust, but perhaps that is premature."

Akua eyed him for a moment, then let out a few rich chuckles.

"My lord of Nok," she said, "I once saw her order an unconditional surrender of her armies in the middle of a battle just so that she could *win in the exact way she wanted*. And Abreha's claim to have found mages that could free her of the Night is patently absurd, given that I am fairly certain to lesser goddesses intervened directly in her raising as undead."

She patted his arm fondly.

"Of course she sent you," Akua said. "Mostly likely ordered you to support me as well. So what is it she's after – opening gates to her armies or switching sides halfway through the battle?"

Seeing she would not be convinced, the High Lord of Nok changed his angle of approach.

"Even if there had been such a scheme," Dakarai Sahel said, "would I be bound to it when out of her sight?"

He glanced at the pyres and the gathering crowd around them.

"You would rule well, I think," the High Lord said. "Better than most. And we will need such a tyrant in the years to come. The world is... not what it used to be. It is larger, and much less patient of our foibles."

Akua considered the older man, still handsome for all his grey hair.

"I had thought, once, to rise from the fields of Liesse an empress of empresses," she said. "Triumphant come anew, magnificent in my wrath."

"Nothing is writ until the book is closed," Dakarai said. "I have spent over half my life failing, Lady Akua. Failing to shake off Thalassina's yoke, to become more than a second-rater among the Truebloods, to keep the Ashurans from sacking my city."

He half-smiled.

"But the book is not yet closed," he said. "The Doom did not bury you. Why give it power it did not earn?"

*Because it did bury me, Akua thought. I thought even failing would be a magnificent act, that my pride would shake the Heavens for an hour and it would be enough, but our stories all end when the tyrant dies. On the last defiant, maddened cry of rage. Instead she had been made to live through her folly. To sift through the ashes of a thousand dead, to see the horror of her doom ripple across the world. She'd been made to look soldiers in the eye, to see under the helmets. And now, returned to her cradle, she could not unsee it. Death was an end, for her and them. But she'd walked the hospitals now, the crying and weeping and the pain. Glimpsed the colossal number of lives, of families, she had ruined for... what?*

What would the Heavens hear, a million screams or a single vainglorious shout? It'd been empty from the start. All she had left was the enormity of what she had done, and she was drowning in it.

"I give the Doom nothing," Akua Sahelian quietly replied.

That had been the lesson of the years that followed it. Even if she saved a hundred thousand lives, it would not even the balance. What she had done to Liesse was not something that could

be bought off, bargained over with angels as she had once bargained with devils. Akua gave the Doom nothing because there was nothing she *could* give. It was not an act that could be redeemed. And in the bleakness of that realization she had come home, for where else could she go, but she hadn't. Not really. Home was not what she remembered it to be. She had been gone too long, now, forgot the ways of the Wasteland. They were no longer sweet against her tongue.

Now it would be a prison to be Dread Empress. A lifetime of clawing at the walls around her, bloodying her fingers trying to change the nature of stone. Back in the dark, in the cloak, only there would be *no way out*.

"We will speak again," she told the High Lord, voice gone hoarse.

She was meant to speak to the assembled nobles and soldiers, to start the pyre personally. It was a good enough excuse to leave. Kendi watched her in silence, eyes smiling. He only kept silent when he knew she had already spoken worse to herself, smelling it out like a bloodhound. Like a petty thief headed for the noose, Akua walked forward. Unthinking, outside herself, as if someone else was moving her body. As if someone else was winning the Tower for her. Already she could be said to have control of all Ater save the Tower and the district around it, the run of the city, and only caution over the Tower's ancient arsenal had prevented an attempt to seize it by force.

Speaking here today would be the first step of her climb. Her backers were pushing for a formal session of the imperial court, which they wanted to use to force down Malicia and coronate Akua Sahelian as Dread Empress of Praes. All she needed to do was whip these nobles and soldiers into a frenzy, to get them screaming the empress to give answer to her empire. Akua climbed the dais raised for that very purpose, standing tall and hollow, but at her feet there was a scuffle. High Lady Takisha Muraqib's retinue was pushing aside everyone else, clearing a space for the ruler of Kahtan at Akua's feet. The Taghreb noble had a hard, blazing look in her eyes as came to stand below the dark-skinned sorceress.

Takisha's scheme had borne fruit, Akua thought. It was now ready to be revealed.

"My lady Sahelian, I apologize for the disorder but I have news for you that cannot be delayed," the High Lady called out, voice resounding.

Bespelled so that it could be heard even from the back, Akua noted.

"Speak, then," she idly ordered.



"As of a half hour ago, my agents seized the weather-controlling artefacts of the Tower in your name," Takisha said. "Soon the rest of the Tower will follow, and we can-"

Thunder rolled. The clouds around the Tower had turned black and were spreading out, crackling with red lightning. A heartbeat of stillness. A flash of red struck a tall house in the middle of capital, blowing it up in a flash of red flames. The winds began to howl, growing in strength. Hail like black and hardened rocks began to fall in sheets, covering swaths of the city, and in the chaos Akua looked up at the roiling darkness.

"It can be hard, Malicia, can it not?" she murmured. "To tell the difference between a knot and a noose."

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"Answer me," she Spoke.

A year ago, Malicia would not have needed to make a sound. Her power had weakened, grown shallower. *Or perhaps I never grasped how strongly I relied on Rule when Speaking*, she thought. Unfortunate as it was that she had not been able to map out the weaknesses of her aspect properly, it was not something that could truly be tested. The young Soninke lord before her choked for a moment, but then his tense shoulders loosened and he began to talk.

"She sneaks out to drink with her foster sister every few days," he said. "They've been doing it for years. The guards let it happen so long as they don't leave the boundary wards."

Malicia flicked a glance at Ime, whose ageing face was furrowed in thought.

"We'll have to burn a sleeper to get to her there," the spymistress finally said. "Dakarai has been very careful with his camp's defences since changing sides."

The empress did not even hesitate. Now was not the time to balk at burning assets.

"Arrange it," Malicia ordered. "You know whom to implicate."

"That will be much easier," Ime snorted. "Even after Abreha's purges her camp remains a leaking sieve."

It had made Sepulchral a manageable threat, in those days where the High Lady of Aksum – illegally now, given her state of undeath – had been an empress-claimant. Malicia would not have risked allowing or stretching out a rebellion against if she had not been certain that she could not kill her would-be usurper whenever she desired. Sanaa Mirembe's failed coup at Kala had

been a stinging blow, given that it might have swung the victory there the other way, but her aunt's culling of the young girl's supporters when she returned from the grave had not caught all of the empress' agents.

Even now, only the very highest secrecy in the Aksum camp remained beyond to Malicia's eyes and ears.

"I'll see if I can ease your way a tad more," Malicia smiled, crouching before the bound man.

Her aspect pulse in her, slowly gaining in power as it fully unfolded. It felt like sliding on gloves, though to Alaya's anger it was a tighter fit than it'd once been. Yet her **Rule** had not been toppled, and it was enough. The young lord's mind felt like clay under her ghostly fingers, but she must be careful. Carelessness would just shatter his mind. Instead Malicia shaped her will, her order, and slid it into his mind like the slenderest of needles. Never to be noticed until it was pressed against. When the Dread Empress opened her eyes, which she did not recall closing, she rose from her crouch slightly out of breath.

"He will signal one of the Eyes the moment he's aware of the girl sneaking out," Malicia said. "Focus on preparing the assets."

Ime nodded, looking pleased, but as **Connect** flickered to life Malicia saw that this was not entirely true. Her spymistress truly was pleased, but it was a small thing compared to her worry.

"You have concerns," the Dread Empress said.

Ime did not quite manage to smother the surprise out of her eyes.

"I do, though not about this particular plot," the spymistress said. "May I speak freely?"

Malicia glanced at the young lord, whose eyes were already focused anew. He would need either full turning or a memory scramble before he was released back to the Okoro camp, but either way it was a needless risk to keep speaking in front of him.

"Outside," the empress said. "Our friend here still needs attending to."

Ime nodded, the two of them leaving the comfortable cell in the middle levels of the Tower. The spymistress disappeared long enough to pass to her subordinates the necessary orders before returning to Malicia's side, the two of them briskly heading to one of the sky rooms. Dread Empress Sanguinia had not indulged in the sort of grandiose building projects that many of her

contemporaries had, but she had liked to eat her meal with views of Ater splayed out below her. Only two of sky rooms she'd built for that purpose had survived the fall of the Tower after the First Crusade and they were no longer used for that purpose but the very skilled wardwork keeping them protected *had* remained largely intact.

It was a good place to speak, even if the view was... temporarily indisposed.

Baiting Takisha to make a play for the Cloud Engines had taken longer than Malicia would have liked, but it had turned out exactly as planned. The High Lady of Kahtan had spent most of her hidden pieces in the Tower and badly failed at achieving her objective. Even worse, the empress had ensured that the few survivors who'd managed to flee would report that it was Takisha's men who had damaged the Engines during the fighting and so unleashed the brutal storm still ravaging Ater and its surroundings. It had been days since the failed coup, and still the gales and lightning struck with wrath. There had been snow, hail, acidic rains and winds so scorching they burned the skin. Hundreds if not thousands had died in Ater, the entire capital grinding down to a halt.

High Lady Takisha was probably the most despised woman in the city at the moment, and that was just the beginning of her troubles. When Malicia had ordered her mages to ensure the Cloud Engines were unleashed under the pretext of some cosmetic damage, she'd ensured that the red lightning would strike a particular target: the tent of the eldest son of High Lord Jaheem Niri, the man's wife and their two children. None had survived, and so dearest Akua had spent most of the last few days trying to ensure that two of her most prominent supporters did not begin a war of their own. Had she begun to feel the weight, Malicia wondered? Had it begun to sink in that once you had the support of the High Seats, you then had to *keep the High Seats happy*?

The dark sky with crackling red light was only the beginning of it all, Malicia thought as she looked through the great enchanted windows.

"I feel like some of the plans we're going forward with are overly risky," Ime said the moment the door closed and the wards hummed.

"We can handle the High Seats," Malicia replied, frowning. "That they have all essentially abandoned our cause frees us to act without many of our old restraints."

It had been difficult to arrange such a wholesale desertion, but it had worked. Alaya had found it hard to bear to send out the Sentinels to brutally put down the riot she'd set up, but the results spoke for themselves: with most of the city turning

against her, the High Seats had followed suit. Amends could be made to Ater after this all came to an end, she told herself. If she was to live to see a new moon, she needed Akua Sahelian put forward as Dread Empress at just the right time.

"Our operations to break relations between the High Seats are calculated risks," Ime stated. "Some of them are riskier than others – Sargon could react like a cornered rat if he figures out our involvement – but I can live with the risks. It's the other plan I have issues with."

"Working with the Intercessor," Malicia said.

"Devils make contracts," Ime shrugged. "That is the way of things. We make the bargains we must. Yet what you two have been doing is dangerous to your reign."

"Delaying until the orcs arrive is necessary," the empress said. "The Bard insists it must be threefold motif and near every scrap of namelore I have found indicates she is not inventing the requirement. We have already thrown the goblins at her and soon the separatists will make contact. We need the Clans to close the loop."

"I'm not happy about the separatists either, to be frank," the spymistress said. "There's always been sentiment in the Green Stretch, but it's never been this well organized. Too many deserters settled down there, Malicia. They have former officers and fighting men now, not just farmers. If the Black Queen takes does decide to sponsor the Green Stretch seceding, I'm uncomfortable at the idea that it might *stick*."

"The sponsorship of a corpse means nothing," Malicia said. "And we both know Vivienne Dartwick will not go to war over the Green Stretch."

"The lack of long-term consequences relies on the assumption of our success," Ime insisted. "Let's say both you and the Black Queen live. She backs the secession, and it happens in the months after we've thoroughly destroyed relations between most High Seats."

Malicia's brow creased.

"You worry there is a risk that more secessions could follow, given that my authority will be weak for the first few years following this," she finally said.

"It's a possibility we can't just dismiss," Ime said.

And she was right, in the sense that the risk existed, but that did not matter. To avoid taking the lesser long-term risk, a larger short-term risk had to be taken instead. And given that in

the first instance trouble would be for the Empire and in the second it was Alaya's life on the line, the choice made itself.

"Lost provinces can be taken back," Malicia finally said. "Such setback would not be permanent."

"We still don't know where the orcs will fall in all this," Ime quietly said. "They have a Warlord and we know it's not Troke, so they're difficult to predict. We are looking at a very volatile situation that could potentially result in permanent losses for the Dread Empire, Your Majesty. All this to follow the nebulous plan of an entity we cannot trust and have no real leverage over. I urge you to reconsider."

And Malicia did, for a moment, but the reasons why she had made the decision had not changed. The Intercessor was a snake, but she was a snake who wanted Catherine Foundling dead – and the main thrust of that method of killing was to bury the Black Queen in regional disputes so that it would become the shape of her Role. A shape that could then be exploited to kill her in the moments that followed, though Malicia suspected around then would be when the Bard betrayed her. She had prepared accordingly. Until then, the disputes had to be put forward to the Black Queen and that meant following through regardless of the risks.

To hesitate here meant death.

"I understand your concerns," Malicia said, "but I stand by the decision."

Ime slowly nodded, face unreadable. The Dread Empress slid her will into **Connect**, but the aspect only flickered weakly. All she glimpsed was a vague sense of disappointment, with no real idea of the depth of it. Malicia would have to try this again later to be sure her spymistress' loyalty remained firm.

"So long as you are aware of my concerns," Ime said, bowing. "I'll take my leave, Your Majesty. There is much work to do."

Malicia nodded her goodbye, remaining before the window as the other woman left the room. The storms still raged under her calm gaze, and it would continue to do so until almost two weeks had passed. So her mages had promised. Once the Clans were close enough it would pass and the last dance could begin. Two weeks would be all that Dread Empress Malicia would need to gore the 'alliance' behind Akua Sahelian. Already Kahtan and Okoro were at odds, but that was only a start. High Lord Dakarai would turn on Abreha when his favourite daughter – Isoba Mireembe's wife – was assassinated seemingly at Sanaa Mireembe's order, as it was certain the High Lady of Aksum would not punish her favoured heir for something she had not done.

Then Sargon Sahelian would catch goblin infiltrators selling the ward schematics of his personal sleeping tent to agents of High Lord Jaheem Niri, burning two bridges at once with the spectre of Wither and Jaheem clasping hands to assassinate him. High Lord Dakarai had already begun to try buying the support of some of Kahtan's more powerful vassals in his quest to become Chancellor, it would be child's play to have him caught by some of Takisha's agents – and it would play on the High Lady's worst fear, that the grand Taghreb coalition behind her was already falling apart.

Meanwhile of them were going to have incidents with the Legions, which would be much easier to arrange now that Akua had gone 'against Malicia's will' to bring private soldiers into the city and into Legion barracks. The Black Knight was wavering, but soon enough the Legions would be reminded of why they had steered clear of the High Seats for so long. And while everyone bit and everyone bled, Dread Empress Malicia would stoke the hunger with the prize she'd put on the table by making her cause seem finished: the position of Chancellor. It was in the nature of Praesi to begin squabbling over the spoils the moment victory was in sight.

So she'd dragged it into sight.

"It will work," Alaya whispered to the storm. "Hour by hour I will pull at the knots keeping me bound, you will only know I have won when you feel the noose around your neck."

## **Interlude: Burn Away What You Once Were**

*"Power isn't gold or faith or oaths. Power is the moment the tip of the knife punches through. Everything else flows from that source."*

– Dread Empress Massacre

Arthur adjusted his helmet for what had to be the hundredth time, trying to keep dawn's light out of his eyes. He hated to admit it, as it felt like he was being childish, but he was bored out of his mind. Normally he would have sought sympathy and conversation from Apprentice, but this morning she was... otherwise occupied. Sapan was looking at the new war engine hungrily as its wheels creaked against the stone and it was dragged forward by oxen. The Ashuran had no interest in the military applications of the great machine, he knew: the draw was that it was, in effect if not in principle, a massive magical artefact.

"If that thing were a woman, you would have gotten slapped by now," Arthur drily said.

Sapan turned somewhat amused brown eyes on him.

"And what would *you* know about staring at women?" Sapan teased.

Arthur politely coughed. Fair enough.

"I don't understand what's so fascinating about it," the Squire admitted. "It's a drill, Sapan. A large, fat drill on wheels."

She rolled her eyes at him, brushing back wild strands of wavy hair that no earthly amount of hairclips seemed able to tame.

"And how do drills work, Arthur?" she challenged.

He cocked an eyebrow.

"Someone moves about with their arms until there's a hole in something," he summed up.

She glared at him, very much aware he was actively trying to piss her off. Arthur hid his grin behind the thoughtful, pious expression that he'd honed against brothers and sisters of the House.

"Fine," Sapan growled. "Who's going to *move about* the handle to that fat drill, Squire?"

"There isn't one," he noted. "Which does seem like something of a design flaw, but I suspect the sappers might have taken ill to my pointing that out."

No one made it through more than a few months in the Army of Callow without learning that getting on the wrong side of the sappers was a costly mistake. Not even the Order picked that fight without good reason.

"That's the magical part," Apprentice said. "At the end of the drill, that large section in bronze, it's enchanted."

"It's also polished," Arthur helpfully contributed.

"I think that's purely decorative," Sapan admitted. "But never mind that. Lord Hierophant and the Callowan mage cadres enchanted the insides thoroughly, it took them days."

"Enchanted to do what?" Squire asked, honestly curious.

"It's directed kinetic force," she excitedly said. "But *entirely* self-contained. The excess that the Due should release is instead used in a secondary array that ensures centrifugal force won't destroy the artefact from the inside."

"So it makes the drill turn," Arthur hazarded.

The dark-haired Ashuran eyed him like he was the lowliest sort of cockroach.

"Yes, Arthur," she disdainfully said, "*it makes the drill turn*. It's not at all a staggering triumph of runic and mundane engineering that was believed physically impossible by most scholars until a few years ago."

She raised her nose.

"You ignorant... horse-rider fuck," Sapan tried.

Apprentice's magical talents had been found very early, she'd told him – five years old – and she'd spent her entire life either in mage schools or under the private tutelage of scholarly old mages. That sheltered upbringing had left her with no real experience insulting people, something a few years around soldiers had miraculously failed to change. It really was quite impressive how terrible she was at it.

"You're also riding a horse," Arthur mildly pointed out.

She huffed in distaste, looking away, and the Squire smiled. He was slightly less bored now, though it would be hours yet before he saw fighting. Neither of them would be in the first wave into the breach in the eastern walls of Ater, which would be preceded by an escalate to tie up enemy mages and engines anyway. They'd be going in with the second wave, with precise objectives. The Hellhound's plan was to break through enemy defences quickly and rush to seize defensible grounds deeper in the city before the Praesi could mount a proper counterattack. Grandmaster Talbot had approved of the plan when he'd briefed the Order, much as he tended to approve of Marshal Juniper herself.

Some among the knights had often resented that of the man, especially those of old nobles lines who still resented such a young greenskin holding such high command, but even the worst of the naysayers had been watching their words since Kala. Besides, it'd never been a popular sentiment with the army. The known faces from the early Fifteenth – the Hellhound and the Princekiller, Robber and Pickler, Ratface and Aisha Bishara – were almost as famous as the Woe and nearly as cherished. There was a certain cachet to having served under the Black Queen since the start, the kind that got people buying you drinks and asking for stories even if you'd only been a legionary.

Arthur had raged against his age, in Laure, listening to those stories and feeling like he was letting the era pass him buy. Now he'd caught up to the days, he stood in the thick of it, and it was so very little like he'd thought it would be.

"Look up," Sapan suddenly said. "It's starting."

The Squire's eyes sought the horizon. Apprentice was right. Atop the walls of Ater in the distance, in the light of rising sun, steel glittered as legionaries manned the walls. Ballistae were



dragged into position, mage cabals began gathering power and as the vanguard of the Army of Callow crossed some invisible line all the Hells were unleashed. Rays of light and scores of fireballs, hails of bolts from the engines. Before the storm could hit the regulars in front, the House Insurgent made its presence known through great panels of yellow light that stopped the enemy fire cold.

Great iron ladders were rushed to the front, and the Battle of Ater began.

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"They're being reckless," the Black Knight frowned. "Priests or not, the walls of Ater are not so easily taken."

The Army of Callow was abandoning traditional Legion doctrine for this fight, which made Marshal Nim Mardottir uncomfortable. She'd already been had by the Hellhound once and she had no intention of suffering a second reverse when the stakes were so high. The enemy were still at least half an hour away from landing their first ladders on the outer walls, the first of the set encircling the capital, so the Black Knight was taking the time to properly observe their formation. Which was a mess. The enemy legionaries were breaking ranks to move faster, which meant every time something passed through the shields the Callowan mages and priests had put up it was guaranteed a casualty.

"They know the longer it takes them to breakthrough the more force we'll be able to concentrate here," Akua Sahelian replied, golden eyes calm. "We've barely a third of the Legions on the wall here, their best shot at getting into the city without massive casualties is overwhelming us early."

There were two women that the city called 'empress' in whispers, Nim thought, but there was only one of them here on the wall. It was more complicated than that in truth, she knew, since Malicia would likely lose her life if she strayed too far from the Tower. And yet there was something primal and easy to understand in one being here and the other not. There was a simplicity to that, a clarity. And the Marshal had seen in the eyes of the legionaries here that it was a clarity they embraced. Amadeus had won the love of the Legions as much by fighting in the ranks with them as by the rest, and the Black Queen was no different. It was a simple thing, the Black Knight thought, but not a small one.

"It won't work," Nim said. "They'll make footholds, they've got the belly for that, but we'll take them back as soon as we're reinforced. Marshal Juniper is no fool, Sahelian. There's something else afoot."

"I have eyes on the forces of Aksum and Nok," Lady Akua replied. "If the expected treachery manifests, it won't be a knockout

blow. Yet they've made no preparations for battle or sent troops into the capital as far as I can tell."

"Might be there will be a strike force of Named," the Black Knight mused. "I'm surprised the Archer and the Huntress haven't already begun returning fire against the ballistae."

It was fucking absurd that the two women could serve as a countermeasure against siege engines by virtue of being able to shoot the crews at similar engagement ranges, but Nim had considered how to compensate for that since her defeat at Kala. Now she had wooden panels to defend and replacement sappers waiting. She wouldn't be caught unprepared again.

"Catherine won't depend on Named for such a critical part of the plan," Lady Akua said, tone firm. "There's an enemy on the field that could make her pay for such a thing dearly."

"Then we're still in the dark about their plans," Marshal Nim said.

"I imagine that massive drill will have a role to play," the golden-eyed noble noted. "If Hierophant didn't enchant that I'll leap down this wall. Best to assume it will go through the walls like a knife through butter."

The Black Knight blinked.

"These are the walls of Ater," she slowly said. "There's so many wards and enchantments in these walls we can't even list them all anymore."

"And he is the Hierophant," Lady Akua lightly replied. "Miracles are his trade, Marshal. Gods know he's vivisected enough of them."

Nim had learned it did not pay to argue with the sorceress when it came to the talents of the Woe, so she kept her skepticism stowed away.

"Best hurry up the evacuation of the districts then," the Black Knight said. "We don't want citizens caught in the middle of whatever they'll unleash."

"I expect she'll go out of her way to limit civilian casualties," Lady Akua said, "but I agree it is better safe than sorry. I'll send word to High Lady Muraqib that a loan of mages capable of scrying would be appreciated, it should make it easier to coordinate the movements."

And the fucking idiot would be glad of any way to salvage her reputation, as she ought to be after having botched a coup attempt on the Tower so badly it'd wracked the capital with

storms for twelve days. If the 'empress in the city' hadn't stepped in to organize emergency shelter and food convoys moved under mage shields it might have been tens of thousands that died instead of almost three. Meanwhile, to Nim's disgust, the High Seats had squabbled with each other like children and kicked up dust in the Legions' eyes while they were at it. That lot wouldn't be able to lead sailors to a whorehouse even with the fucking Wizard of the West guiding the way.

The Black knight's general staff agreed that the only reason the Army of Callow hadn't crushed them while they were busy was that it would have been charging into the storm itself and Catherine Foundling hadn't wanted to take the risk.

Nim had only barely gotten her orders out when Captain Laughable took her aside, murmuring that there was a situation. A suspicious person had been caught and made prisoner. The Black Knight took a short detour to pick up Lady Akua, who was informing the High Lady of Kahtan with a smile that surely risking her mages was worth the love of the people, and they headed out to the supply depot below the bastion where Laughable was keeping the man. Among the crates, a poorly-shaved Taghreb was bound and sporting a purpling black eye.

"Caught him sniffing about the bastion, ma'am," Captain Laughable said. "Said he was just waiting for a friend, but we think he might have been counting troops."

"I take it he resisted arrest?" Nim asked.

"You could say that," Laughable coldly said. "He knifed Sergeant Kilzi right in the throat and tried to make a run for it. We broke both legs so he'd know better than to try that again."

Nim's hand clenched, the steel of her armour creaking.

"Who do you work for?" the Black Knight asked in Taghrebi.

The man only laughed. Lady Akua approached, which had him tensing, but though she took his face in hand it was not to inflict a curse. Instead she studied the side of his head, picking at the sideburns, and snorted before releasing him.

"There is no point in speaking that tongue to him, Lady Black," Akua Sahelian said. "He is not Taghreb. That man is *Levantine*. It's why there are still traces of face paint in the roots of his hair, near the skin."

"Infiltrators," Nim growled.

"He won't be alone," Lady Akua said. "We should immediately-"

"Too late," the man grinned with bloodied teeth, speaking accented Lower Miezani. "You found us too late. It'll be over by now."

The Black Knight seized his torso and dragged him up, anger roiling.

"What?" she demanded. "*What* did you do?"

The man only laughed louder, and then in the distance there was a great grinding sound. Old gears pushing against each other, moving a great weight.

"The gates," Akua Sahelian calmly said. "They opened one of the gates."

The same enchanted gates that took about half an hour to fully open, that could not be stopped when they began without wrecking the machinery.

The Army of Callow's vanguard was a quarter hour away from setting foot in the city.

—

"They're retreating," Alexis said, sounding impressed. "Like Marshal Juniper said they would."

"Our Hellhound's got a good read on the opposition," Archer said. "It's what she's here for."

Indrani hadn't actually paid all that much attention when the plan had been explained to her and Masego had been reading under the table the whole time — he'd cunningly glued a book under with the pages hanging down and he turned the pages with a spell so he wouldn't be caught — so she had only limited idea of what was happening. She figured the Legions had decided it was a losing fight to try to hold the walls with the gates open and two thirds of their number still on the way, so they were bailing backwards to a defensive position. Made sense, kind of? Not really her problem anyway. The three of them were after a different kind of prey.

"I'm still now sure what I'm here for," Cocky complained. "In case you hadn't notice, this is *inside* Ater."

"No shit?" Archer mused. "I was wondering why the walls were facing the wrong way."

Alexis actually looked like she was suppressing a smile. That or she was twitching in anger. Knowing the Silver Huntress, it might actually be the two.

"We could at least get off the rooftops," the Concocter tiredly said. "It's only a matter of time until someone looks up."

That was actually untrue, Indrani thought. Most humans only rarely looked up, when something prompted them to. In her experience, skulking atop rooftops in a city was a pretty decent way to get around unseen if you put a minimum of effort into remaining unseen. She had no intention of actually telling Cocky that, though.

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't be able to stand on the ledge and let the wind do that neat flappy thing with my cloak," Archer sagely replied. "And that would be a net loss for Creation."

Alexis cleared her throat.

"Patrol's gone," she said. "We should get a move on."

Archer straightened her back.

"Let's go then," she said. "Found an old tower-shrine to Nihilis last time I came that'll be the prefect perch."

Cocky grumbled under her breath, but they set out. Neither of them had lost a step since Refuge when it came to sneaking about – the classic game of better-not-let-that-manticore-see-you truly was the finest of teachers – and they were better equipped now than they'd ever been before. Cat was always good for that, shelling out the coin for what her people needed. They were already past the Legion lines, but that wasn't what their target anyway. Juniper was confident she could take Nim in a slugfest in the streets, and Archer figured the Hellhound had it right.

It was the noble armies that Cat and the Hellhound wanted kept out of this mess as long as possible, and that was why the three of them were out here. The imperial shrine was pretty easy to find, a tower of black stone three stories high that was covered with reliefs of Dread Emperor Nihilis' victories and filled with little alcoves where people could leave offerings. It wasn't as common a practice as it'd been in older timers, making those, but Indrani saw a few fresh copper coins and fresh flowers that hadn't been there last time she came. Aterans said it was good for luck.

The alcoves made it easier to climb, at least, and when they all got up on the flat top – covered in bird shit, but they'd all crawled through worse – the sight was worth a whistle. It was easy to see far out into the city, until you hit the taller buildings of the central districts, and that meant Indrani got a good look at the soldiers and banners moving through the streets. Like Juniper had said she would, the Black Knight had called for noble reinforcements.

"Kahtan," Alexis said, frowning. "Okoro and Nok. Hundreds of smaller lords"

Ol' Abreha wasn't taking the field then. Shame. Dakarai of Nok wasn't as deep in their camp, he might actually intend to fight to defend the city.

"We've got our targets, then," Indrani said. "We kill the bigwigs and the generals, it'll keep them confused enough they'll be late to the fight."

"Archer."

"I kind of want High Lady Muraqib," Indrani mused. "You can have High Lord Jaheem, Lexy, unless you-"

"*Indrani*," Cocky hissed. "Look."

Archer followed the pointed finger to a rooftop to their west. Someone was standing there on a ledge, looking down into the streets. Her cloak was doing the neat flappy thing in the wind, which Indrani mentally applauded. The Ranger turned, met their stares and winked.

A moment later she leapt down into the streets.

"You wanted to know why Cat sent you with us, Cocky?" Indrani said. "You were just looking at the reason."

A cleaner story, Catherine had called it, and who was Archer to argue with her? Cat might have died a bunch of times but it'd yet to stick, and that was the kind of crazy she was proud to embrace.

"We don't know what she's up to," the Concocter hesitated.

Alexis' fingers tightened into fists.

"Does it matter?" the Silver Huntress asked. "She's our enemy."

Archer shook her head.

"It matters," Indrani said. "We do this all three of us or we don't do it at all."

The Huntress glanced at her in surprise, then slowly nodded.

"I have permission, if we want to pursue," Indrani told Cocky.

The other woman hesitated still.

"She won't hold back," Cocky said.

"Neither will we," Indrani said.

Surprise, once more.

"You *want* to fight her?" Cocky asked.

It was her turn to hesitate.

"I want to know where I stand," Archer finally said.

The Concocter quietly laughed.

"I don't care where I stand," she said, "as long as it's far from her. But that's something we'll have to earn, isn't it? The right to put her behind us."

Cocky breathed out, rose to her feet.

"I'm in," the Concocter said.

A silence passed between them, not quite comfortable but not unpleasant. Determined, Indrani thought, determined might be the right word.

And so the last three students of the Lady of Lake began to hunt her.

—

A torrent of flame howled down the street, forcing the enemy to huddle behind houses, and even as the roar of the fire drowned out the clamour of the fighting the Black Knight raised her voice higher still.

"Collapse the *fucking* walls," Marshal Nim screamed. "We need to slow them down."

Lady Akua's spell ended moments later, the fires blinking out, but the reprieve she'd bought them was well-spent: sappers collapsed two houses and a temple with demolition charges, barring the avenue with the falling stones. It wouldn't keep the Callowans away for long, but it would slow them down enough that the Fourth and Fifth Companies would be able to retreat to the fortifications in the plaza down the street. Legionaries streaming around them, the Black Knight and the Lady Warlock retreated away from the frontline. In the time they'd spent to put out the crisis here, another would have emerged somewhere else.

"How long until the drill starts working again?" the Black Knight asked.

"Half an hour at most," Lady Akua grimaced. "It's devilish piece of work."

The way the sorceress had explained it, the drill actually drained the power of enchantments it touched to harden itself and make some kind of array in its back move faster. Nim had almost doubted her eyes when the fucking thing had taken a mere ninety heartbeats to pierce through some of the finest walls on all of Calernia, stopping only because it had overheated and was at risk of melting. Worse yet was the realization that the Hellhound had never intended the thrust of her attack to be on Legion positions. While Nim had repositioned her forces to contain the disaster spilling out of the open gate, the drill had punched through the wall by another gate and the second wave of the Army had bypassed her defensive set-up entirely.

She'd lost a third of her force in an hour trying to contain that attack, which had forced her to call on reinforcements from the nobility against Malicia's standing orders. They'd hurried enough that the fighting in the abandoned districts of the southeast had erupted before the Callowans could take the Licosian Gates, one of the chokepoint of the city the Hellhound had clearly been aiming for. It was bloody enough fighting that the Black Queen was there and slinging around Night in amount that wiped out entire companies, but the nobles were still holding. The fear right now was that the Army of Callow would just use the damned drill again to open another breach behind the defensive position of the High Lady of Kahtan to flank it.

Some of the Black Knight's scouts up on the walls had signaled there were troop movements outside the city, so Nim suspected that unless that fucking drill was broken for good Ater would fall before Noon Bell rang.

"Then we need to hit it," the Black Knight said. "You and I, leading a company. It's the only way we can contain them long enough."

And if they were contained, if they were kept bottled up in a few districts and mage fire could be brought to bear? They would be routed out of the city. Already the enemy's priests were flagging in strength, and when they were out for the count the magical advantage would fall overwhelmingly in the favour of the defenders.

"Agreed," Lady Akua said. "Do you, by any chance, happen to have a disreputable company of golden-hearted rogues with a chequered past who have something to prove under your command?"

"A what," the Black Knight replied.

"It would *significantly* increase our chances of success," Lady Akua insisted.

The reply on the tip of Nim's tongue was set aside when a flare of red light caught her attention. Signals going up in the sky.



An attack from behind the Licosian Gates. But the drill had not yet been moved! *How?* Another flare went up, and another, and another. All in a straight line.

"Gods," Marshal Nim Mardottir gasped, "what is this?"

—

Arthur fell down to his knees, panting and out of breath.

"You all right, sir?"

The Squire limply gestured at the sergeant to make it clear he was in no danger. Just exhausted. Running out of that house before it collapsed after the ogres knocked down the walls would have been hard even if he *weren't* wearing plate armour. After a few moments to catch his breath, he dragged himself back up. Sergeant Hart slapped his back in a friendly manner.

"Back into the melee, then," the older man cheerfully said. "For queen and country and combat pay."

"The Black Knight wasn't with the ogres," Arthur said. "We need to find a scrying mage to ask for sightings again."

Running around blindly was unlikely to let him find the Black Knight, especially if she was actively avoiding him as he believed she was. That the Doom of Liesse had been seen with her only made the prospect of facing down his rival all the more daunting. Hopefully Sapan would be able to — wait, where was Sapan?

"Sergeant, where is the Apprentice?" he asked.

"We lost her when we hit that blaze three blocks back, I think," Sergeant Hart said. "She could be anywhere by now."

"Then we start by finding her," the Squire said. "We need to find an officer."

"That one looks like a lieutenant," Sergeant Hart said, pointing upwards. "Light armour, so probably in the scouts."

Arthur looked up and found a lieutenant standing atop a rooftop, looking into the distance. It was a start, the young man decided, and he asked his companion to stay behind as he climbed up the side of wall. The other man glanced at him before returning to his study of the city.

"Good morning, lieutenant," Arthur tried.

"Is it?" the officer replied, sounding amused. "You have been in the Army of Callow for too long."

"Might be," the Squire politely smiled.

He approached, enough to see that it was an older man he was speaking to: salt-and-pepper beard, greying hair. Likely a veteran. The goblin steel blade at his hip spoke to that.

"I am looking for a companion," Arthur said.

"The Apprentice, yes," the man replied. "She was headed west last I saw. I believe there's a scrying relay there three streets back, it seems her likeliest destination."

Well, that'd been faster than anticipated.

"Thank you, lieutenant," the Squire said.

"It was my pleasure," the officer replied, once more sounding amused.

Arthur began to walk away, but something was itching away his instincts. He paused.

"You never gave me your name," the Squire said.

"How forgetful of me," the man said, but did not elaborate.

Arthur's eyes narrowed.

"What is it you're looking for, lieutenant?"

"The flares," the officer replied, pointing to the southeast.

The lights were still in air, though fading. Signals warning of attacks where the Squire knew there should be no troops.

"A bluff," he said.

"Dismissing the unexpected is a bad habit, Squire," the man chided.

Arthur's hand went for his sword.

"You're not a lieutenant," he said.

"Did I ever claim to be?" the man replied, smiling.

He made no move to unsheathe his blade, which had Arthur reluctant to bare his own. The stranger had not yet been proved an enemy.

"What is it you're doing here?" the Squire pressed. "Answer me."

"Waiting," he said. "For a little while longer. You can keep me company if you'd like."

Arthur's eyes narrowed.

"Why?"

"We are relations of a sort," the man chuckled. "Besides, what else is there for you to hurry to? You won't be finding Marshal Nim."

His sword was in his hand before he even realized he'd bared it.

"Who are you?" the Squire demanded.

The stranger looked away, into the distance, and suddenly let out a quiet laugh.

"Ah, fateful timing," he said. "It has been some time since I've last been on the right side of it."

There was a ripping sound in the distance, then a furious screech. Arthur stepped back.

"What was *that*?" Arthur asked.

"So many questions," the man teased, "but this one I'll give you for free."

He turned fully for the first time since they'd been talking, and Arthur Foundling met a pale of eerie green eyes over a bladelike smile.

"That," the Carrion Lord said, "was several hundred years' worth of giant spiders joining this battle."

## **Interlude: The Hanged All Crooning**

*"Would-be tyrants always snigger when a hero comes knocking, smirking at each other that if they were in charge surely they would have killed the man when he was still a callow youth. Idiots. Do you have any idea how many callow youths are out to kill me, Chancellor? If I killed them all I could make a second Tower out of the corpse pile. The best you can do is massacre here and there and hope it's one of the dumb ones that survives all the way to your door."*

– Dread Empress Rancorous

A tide of chitinous vermin poured out of the sewers, disgusting eight-legged creatures the size of horses that screeched under the glare of the sun and spread out like a plague. And they kept coming out: a dozen, a hundred. How long until it was a thousand, or even more than that? Arthur turned a glare on the disguised man that could only be Amadeus of the Green Stretch, the Carrion

Lord himself. The older man seemed as indifferent to his fury as he was to the screams sounding in the distance.

"You madman," the Squire shouted. "You're releasing them into the city!"

"Well spotted," the Carrion Lord praised.

Arthur suspected he was not imagining that sardonic undertone.

"People are going to die," the orphan bit out. "Thousands-"

"An entirely foreseeable consequence of giving battle in a crowded city," the Carrion Lord noted. "Is it only collateral damage not of your own making that offends?"

"*Innocents* will die," the Squire seethed. "Innocents are already dying. And you're playing word games with me?"

"You're letting the Book do you thinking for you," the green-eyed man chided. "*Think*, boy. Where did you see signals being sent up? Where do we stand right now?"

Arthur seized his anger by the neck, slowed it, but did not set it aside. Anger was good, anger was your soul telling you something was unacceptable and you ought to do something about it. But the dark-haired orphan forced himself to think. The flares he'd seen in the sky, they'd been in a broad line going south to north across Ater. A battle line, he thought. The breaches, the place where the spiders were coming through, they were all places where there'd already been fighting. Soldiers.

"You sent them after armies," the Squire said.

"I did," the Carrion Lord easily replied. "I've known this city for decades, judging where the fighting would take place during the assault was not difficult. Thought that fascinating engine – Masego's work, yes? – took me by surprise. I had to compensate with some heavy-handedness around the Licosian Gates."

"You may yet ruin this city and all in it," Arthur bit out. "Worse yet, what manner of dark bargain did you strike to get power over the spiders?"

The green-eyed man cocked his head to the side, looking amused.

"Arthur Foundling," he drawled, "are you asking me to tell you my evil plan?"

The Squire paused, slightly embarrassed at being caught out instantly. Still, he must persevere.

"Do you not want to tell anyone of your cunning?" Arthur tried. "Surely a great deal of work went into this."

Evil always liked to gloat, unless it was the Dead King and his Revenants, but Lady Alexis said those didn't really count.

"I was going to use you to funnel information to my daughter, but it would be almost unprincipled of me to indulge you after that," the Carrion Lord noted. "I'd be rewarding an unsavoury habit."

"The White Knight told me this usually works," Arthur replied, a tad defensively.

"Well, if the Sword of Judgement said so," the older man drily said. "We must not make a liar out of Judgement's favourite meat puppet, I'll tell you everything."

Arthur eyed him skeptically. Maybe taking him prisoners would be safer. The Carrion Lord was on the edge of the roof, his sword still in the sheath and he was no longer Named. Just an aging man in light mail. One who was looking at him with calm, cool eyes. The fight would be his to lose, the Squire thought. He'd been training with some of the finest warriors on Calernia. And yet under the weight of those pale green eyes Arthur found he was hesitating. His instincts were telling him it was a bad idea, and though his anger at the horror the old monster had just unleashed on Ater was far from quenched he would not let it bait him into making a mistake.

He must find out how the villain was controlling the horde, what power or artefact, so that the spiders could be forced back below.

"I am not the Tyrant of Helike, child," the Carrion Lord calmly said. "You are looking for the gimmick, the toy. There is none. I murdered the men and women warding the sewers to keep the creatures out, undid their work sent my associate to stir up the hive. The scent of blood and corpses did the rest."

The monster's face was unsmiling.

"There is no undoing this," he said, and it sounded like a nail hammered into a coffin.

"It won't only be soldiers who die, you fucking animal," the Squire insisted. "Do you think they won't spill out beyond the battle lines into the city? It's only the districts closest to the walls that were evacuated. Civilians are going to die."

"Yes," the Carrion Lord nonchalantly said. "Thousands of them. The city will be on the brink of collapse as the horde spreads. The Legions will dig in, the Army of Callow retreat. And meanwhile the High Seats will look at their household troops, their precious private armies so jealously hoarded, see them bleed and die to save people that are nothing to them. Even as we

“speak they wonder – is this worth it? What am I sacrificing my strength for?”

“You can’t be serious,” Arthur said, appalled. “You’re saying they’ll retreat?”

“They cannot afford that either,” the green-eyed man said. “Praes needs a capital that is not a smoking hovel full of giant spiders. Neither will they be willing to weaken themselves. So they will, instead, revert to... old habits.”

In the distance, the air screamed so loud that even the chittering of the horde was drowned out. Rifts were ripped open, at first only a few then dozens, and it was as if the floodgates had broken. Devils began pouring out of Lesser Breaches and sorceries fouler still: swarms of green and glittering insects, rivers of purple flame and storms in the shape of giants. And among them, things worse than any of the rest slithered. Swam amongst the spiders, turning them to horrors not of Creation.

“Takisha pulled out the storm elementals,” the Carrion Lord noted, sounding surprised. “Didn’t think she’d risk them with the number of demons that were just sent out. Someone’s in a mood.”

“Demons,” Arthur choked out. “As in plural?”

“At least a dozen,” the green-eyed man said. “Catherine will send out Masego to limit the spread, but the damage has already been done.”

“You did this,” the Squire accused.

“I’ve yet to take a life today,” the Carrion Lord replied, amused. “Besides, you miss the altar for the corpse.”

“I see exactly what you’ve done,” Arthur harshly said.

“I am not of any particular importance today,” the man dismissed. “What matters is this: in the heart of Praes, a city packed tight with men and women from all parts of the empire, the High Seats were seen to make a choice. They could have protected the people they claim are theirs, paying in blood and power to fulfill their sworn duty.”

The skyline of the city boiled, wreathed in a hundred different flavours of madness. In stopping the spread of the giant spiders, in trying to break the horde, the fearsome High Lords of Praes were shattering entire swaths of the capital. How many of them had been evacuated? *Too few*, Arthur thought.

“Or they could do this,” the Carrion Lord said. “Dread and hatred, burning the world so they can warm their fingers against the flames.”

"All this so you could gloat that your enemies are as terrible as you?" Arthur scorned.

The green-eyed man faintly smiled.

"I gave them the chance, Squire," he said. "To prove me wrong, to show me that there was some truth to the stories we tell ourselves. That they are the logical conclusion of *jino-waza*, that their rule is more than a thousand years of fangs ripping into flesh. That they deserve the power Praes has given them."

He looked, Arthur thought in a moment of terrifying clarity, disappointed. As if he would have liked to be wrong.

"Yet here we are," the Carrion Lord said. "Before the eyes of all Praes, the High Seats have abdicated their right to rule. They have revealed themselves as nothing more than worms in the flesh. Of all that happens today, that is the only part that matters."

It wasn't about the armies, Arthur realized. Or not just about. Whatever it was the man was after, it wasn't a victory on the field. It was... larger. And, the Squire felt in his bones, infinitely more dangerous.

"What is it you're doing, Carrion Lord?" the Squire quietly asked.

"I am killing the Dread Empire of Praes," the madman replied, "one story at a time."

—

"Well," Archer mused, "this went to shit in a hurry."

As if to punctuate the sentence, the rooftop she was running on exploded in a pillar of blue-grey flames that smelled vaguely of saffron. She landed in a roll on the roof of the temple across the street, reaching for an arrow and halfway nocking it even as the flames across the street collapsed as if they were liquid before beginning to form into a spindly, mantis-like shape. Fortunately, Indrani wasn't going to have to waste any more arrows distracting the construct: silver Light began to glow right behind her.

"I fucking hate those things," Alexis grunted, loosing her arrow.

The missile screamed out with Light, blinding to look at even as Named, and hit the construct with a disappointing flopping sound, just sinking into the liquid-like flames. A moment later the entire construct popped as the Light's continuing presence destroyed the animating spell's framework, making the entire mass of flame drop to the ground in a smoking rain.

"Eh, after that one demon thing that was like a hundred spiders melted together it's going to take a lot to impress me today," Indrani said. "It was *impressively* creepy, and not just because it didn't really seem to get the difference between eyes and teeth."

The Silver Huntress snorted, not disagreeing. Alexis had significantly cheered up since they'd started killing things, although it came and went. Whenever they got close to the Lady it trended downwards, which Cocky had called 'an apt summation of our childhoods' when Indrani had shared the thought with her. Speaking of the Concocter, Archer glanced further back and saw that the now purple-haired potioneer was moving around the needles on that fancy little tracking artefact Cat had given them.

"Found her," Cocky called out. "She's not actually far, just on the other side of the Licosian Gates."

*Well fuck*, Indrani thought, sharing a look with Alexis. That place had been the stronghold held by the troops and vassals of the High Lady of Kahtan an hour back, but not it was pretty much Spidertown. Spiderville, maybe, considering it was pretty large and swarming with way too many giant spiders. Last she'd seen a few pockets of troops were surviving holed up in buildings behind wards they'd put up, but the highborn had pretty much written off taking it back the traditional way so instead they'd turned to the Praesi specialty: a bunch of devils and weird magical killer things.

"That place is bad enough I think even the devils would go back to the Hells if they had a choice," Indrani bluntly said.

"Are you saying we let her lose us?" Cocky challenged.

"No," the Silver Huntress growled. "Fuck that. You still have a set of those blue ones, right?"

"I do," the Concocter said. "And a full healing set."

"We go in with a plan this time, then," Archer insisted. "You don't have anything that heals 'arrow through the eye' which was Alexis almost got last time we thought we were ambushing her."

"She won't get me again," Alexis replied through clenched teeth.

Indrani felt like slugging them both in the face until either sense or teeth came out, knowing the sight of either would be a relief.

"*Listen* to me," Indrani said. "We're not going to beat her like this. She's better than any of us are."



"Impressive," Cocky said, "how you can lick her boot without needing it in front of you."

Archer was not going to punch her in the throat, no matter how *deeply satisfying* it would be.

"Cocky," Alexis warned. "She's not wrong."

Indrani glanced at her in surprise, the Huntress refusing to meet her eyes.

"She's faster and stronger and she has more experience," Archer said. "If we're going to get her, it's by hitting her with something she hasn't seen yet. That means it's not me or Alexis who brings this home, Cocky."

This time it was her that was stared at in surprise.

"She's taught us most of what we know about fighting," Indrani elaborated. "She hasn't taught *you* shit about brewing. What have you got that would serve as a nasty surprise?"

Cocky hesitated.

"She's resistant to pretty much all poisons unless it's ten times the concentration lethal in a human," the Concocter said. "It's an elf thing, I think. But that's for toxins. I've seen her smoke wakeleaf, which is a stimulant and nonmagical. Unless she was just puffing at the pipe for the look of it, it means her resistance doesn't apply to everything."

"You going somewhere with this?" Alexis bluntly asked.

Cocky scowled at her, but moments later she undid a clasp within her satchel and showed them a small vial with a translucent golden liquid inside.

"This is a purified version of elegy," the Concocter said.

Indrani's brow rose.

"The fun times drug?" she asked.

Cocky nodded.

"It won't harm her, but what makes elegy popular in the first place is that when you take it affects your perception of time," she said. "I strengthened the elements that cause that and took out the ones that add a sensation of euphoria."

"She'll be able to burn it out with her Name," the Huntress said.

"No quickly," the Concocter replied with a flash of pearly teeth. "Not with how concentrated it is. There's enough in there if I dropped in a lake I could see the water as the usual drug."

Indrani let out a low whistle.

"She'll need to ingest?" she asked.

"Skin contact would also work, but not nearly as strong," Cocky said.

"Then we need to cram it in her mouth," Indrani grimaced. "That's you and me, Alexis."

"I'll take it," the Huntress immediately said, reaching for the vial.

"It should be me," Archer said, and when glared at shook her head. "You're better up close, much as I hate to admit it. You're more likely to make me an opening than the other way around."

The admission seemed to mollify the other woman some, and they packed their gear again. Just in time, since one of those damned giant-shaped hurricanes was coming their way again. Indrani had seen what happened to the people and spiders that got sucked in, and she had no intention of being shredded to pieces. They got a move on, avoiding the streets that were entirely aflame and the roving packs of devils in the sky. The Licosian Gates had somehow gotten worse since their last trip thereabouts, which Indrani reluctantly accepted as being pretty impressive. The four massive ancient statues seated on either side of the gates were crawling with spiders trying to puncture the spell bubbles keeping the handful of soldiers atop the gatehouse roof, but that was almost wholesome compared to the rest.

Rival torrents of spiders and dog-shaped devils were ripping into each other in the streets around it, savagely devouring each other's flesh while still alive, and some sort of ritual had gone awry enough that balls of lightning were careening across the streets, bouncing off wood and stone but searing flesh with strikes wherever they found it. Some sort of giant snake made of ice and bone had gone wild, which would not have been as much of a problem if it apparently didn't 'eat' creatures that came too close to its body and then vomit them back out from the great maw as masses of leech-like bone creatures that liked to burrow inside the spiders and eat them from the inside. And at the heart of the mess, perched atop a tall statue of Terribilis the Second, the Lady of the Lake stood with her bow at the ready.

Looking bored, she let an arrow loose. It straight through a shield spell, taking a mage in the throat. The blue panel flickered out and moments later spiders began to pour in, screams following as the survivors inside were devoured alive.

"Well," Indrani said. "Good a place as any to fight her, I suppose."

"She's not moving," Cocky frowned. "Baiting us?"

"No, she's here for a reason," Alexis said, eyes narrowing. "Look at her face, she's already gotten bored of this."

Archer rose to her full height, cracking her neck.

"Well," she said. "Let's see if we remedy that."

—

"Our empire seems like such a fragile thing, at first glance," the Carrion Lord said. "Always warring with itself, always eating its young. Half the reason we take the sickness abroad is that there is too much of it festering in our guts. And yet, for all its many and monumental failures, the Dread Empire has stood for over thirteen hundred years."

"You've been broken before," the Squire said. "We brought it down, your Tower."

Eleanor Fairfax had answered the madness of Triumphant sword in hand, as Catherine Foundling had risen to cast out the chains of the Conquest. Evil could last, but it never prospered for long.

"We have," the Carrion Lord easily agreed. "And yet once the crisis passed the Empire formed anew. Its constituent parts came together again instead of staying parted, even though most High Seats are enemies and despise the Tower ruling over them besides. Sowhy?"

"Safety in numbers," the Squire said. "I've seen it out west, the strange alliances peril will forge."

Even the vilest sorts would come to man the wall if the sky grew dark enough.

"If external pressure was the preeminent cause for unification, once that pressure ceased the unity would begin to collapse," the Carrion Lord said. "Yet there have been long periods of relative peace with Callow and the Free Cities that saw no such thing happen."

Arthur frowned. He had never been a great lover of history writ in the large, the wars and treaties and the trades, but that did not sound untrue to him.

"Then because the people of Praes want to be as a single nation," the Squire said instead.

"Close," the Carrion Lord praised. "It is because they *believe* they are a nation."

"Is there a difference?" the Squire said.

"Belief is what comes after desire," the Carrion Lord replied. "Belief has *foundations*. The Dread Empire stands because enough of us believe in the myths of it, the stories of it. So long as those remain, like rivers going to the sea our empire will always remake itself."

"That's not what fate is," the Squire refused. "It's not some curse that can't be broken. If you do it clever, if you do it right, you can change things."

"I believed that, once," the Carrion Lord mildly said. "Then, in my old age, I looked back and found that all the terrible works of my life had been built on quicksand. It was most galling, to realize that the Tyrant of Helike was not entirely wrong when he scorned me."

The old monster did not look all that galled, shrugging.

"But we learn or we die," the Carrion Lord said. "And so once again I picked up a sword and a plan."

"You want to burn it all," the Squire accused.

"I want to take off the noose around our necks," the Carrion Lord said. "There is no kind way to do such a thing."

"Did you even try?" the Squire harshly asked. "You disappeared for years, and when the Black Queen came east to settle affairs you stayed a ghost. Now you reappear, and to do what?"

He gestured at the capital around them, the hell it had turned into.

"The first story is that Praes is a nation," the Carrion Lord calmly said. "A single realm, not a pack of squabbling fiefdoms. That one was the hardest to kill, the longest. It took years to choke it out: a fourth of the Empire became a realm of its own, Kahtan rose as a queendom of the Hungering Sands and the edges of our territory broke away."

"You didn't do that," the Squire said. "You caused none of it."

"I did not need to," the Carrion Lord said. "All that was required of me was to ensure that the hounds fighting over the carcass would never bite into the same piece of flesh. So that they could all bury their snouts in the corpse and never realize until they stood nose-to-nose."

He paused, startled, as he realized what had been implied.

"Gods, you *helped* them do it?" the Squire said.

"I have been a faithful friend to even my enemies," the Carrion Lord agreed. "The second was faster to kill, but it cost me more. It was... difficult, killing the Legions of Terror."

"Kala," the Squire said. "They stood and they bled and they broke."

"Lesser soldiers would have shattered years before," the Carrion Lord said, his pride without veil. "It took an ocean of brutal futility to end that story – it was fresher than the rest. A battle where three sisters fought, none believing in their cause or truly hating the other. A battle where weapons of war killed men by the dozens in heartbeats without swords even touching, where entire armies deserted to one side or the other. It ground the pride of the Conquest to dust."

"And today you burn the High Lords," the Squire said. "Half the city going with them."

"More of a quarter, I should think," the Carrion Lord amusedly replied.

"You could make a river," the Squire coldly said, "of the blood you've spilled today."

"Child, I have spilled seas," the Carrion Lord smiled.

The old monster shrugged.

"And what of it? You look at today's corpses and balk, but even if I'd put every soul in this city to the sword I would still be the lesser evil," the Carrion Lord said. "What are a few years of my bloody hands, compared to the Tower's thousand years of screams and darkness? How many more days like this one will you demand Calernia suffer before my cruelty becomes warranted? How more crowned butchers and torturers and madmen, how many more Triumphants?"

The orphan's fingers tightened around his sword. Evil always had its reasons.

"The excuses of a man who knows nothing except how to destroy," the Squire said.

"We are what we are," the Carrion Lord said, eyes smiling. "Someone charged me, once, to become a man who deserves to live in a better world."

"Only a fool," the Squire said, "would have believed that you could."

The monster looked out at the madness swallowing the city.

"You're not wrong," the Carrion Lord said. "Old dogs only have so many tricks in them. But I made this mess, you see. It's mine to clean up. So now I give you a warning, one you are to carry to my daughter."

"And who are you to warn the Queen of Callow of anything?" the Squire challenged.

"The man who forced three armies to retreat without baring his sword," the Carrion Lord calmly replied.

Arthur swallowed that, did not deny it.

"This is not yet done," the Carrion Lord said. "Tread carefully: I will not tolerate Praes to be handed out like a bauble, or its affairs settled as if you had conquered us. You do not rule here."

"Threats," the Squire snorted. "What will that do?"

"Draw a line in the sand," the Carrion Lord said. "And you I leave with a question. You have been, after all, of great use to me."

"I did *nothing* for you," the Squire harshly replied.

"You helped me draw their eye," the Carrion Lord said, and looked down at the street. "Did you hear me, Gods Below? I paid my dues. Three stories I burned on your altar, the pillars of an empire, and one more still lies ahead. The greatest of them, the oldest and most terrible."

Arthur shivered, looking to the sides. Nothing had changed, not even the wind or the foul scent of smoke, but the world felt... still. As if it did not dare move.

"I gave an oath," the Carrion Lord said. "I'll see it through to the end."

"The Hellgods will not save you," the Squire got out.

"That," the Carrion Lord said, "is rather the point. As for our debt, boy, I ask you this: why do you seek the Black Knight?"

Arthur frowned.

"We have a pattern of three," the Squire said.

"And this makes her your enemy?" the Carrion Lord asked.

"She's a villain," the Squire flatly said.

"So is your queen," the Carrion Lord said. "Her and many you've fought with, never against."

"She's the leader of the Legions of Terror," the Squire said.

"The army defending a realm you are invading," the Carrion Lord said. "For one of Below's, that is reason enough. I had thought your lot to require more than that."

"Don't muddle it up," the Squire growled. "She's tried to kill me too, and I survived. You want me to just let her go now that I hold her to account?"

"I want you to answer a simple question," the Carrion Lord said. "Why is it that Nim Mardottir is your enemy, Squire?"

Arthur's mouth was already halfway open when the man raised his hand.

"Do not speak in haste," the Carrion Lord said. "A squire must, in time, become a knight."

Green eyes studied him coolly.

"Consider, Arthur Foundling, what manner of a knight you are to be."

Arthur's hand stayed tight round his sword.

"You think I'll just let you leave now?" the Squire said. "That I won't take you prisoner?"

The old monster looked up at the sky. No to contemplate, Arthur realized as he followed the look, but to look at the height of the sun. The time.

"I think you are about to be needed elsewhere," the Carrion Lord. "And that-"

The other man's voice had lowered, so Arthur leaned closer to try to understand even as the green-eyed man turned towards him.

That was when the brightstick went off in his face.

—

Northeast of Ater, on a low slope overlooking the distant camps of the nobles, a silhouette was cut into sight by the angle of the sun. The orc stroked the back of his mount, a great wolf large as a bull, and glanced back at the other riders behind him.

"Tell the Warlord now is the time," Chief Troke Snaketooth gravelled. "Ater is ripe for the picking."

## Interlude: Kiss Of The Knife

*"Treason is a distant thing, a matter for the histories. Betrayal is where the bile is: you have to love someone before they can betray you."*

– King Selwyn Fairfax of Callow, the Old

"Why Troke?"

Sigvin was frowning, leaning forward so the noonday sun would not fall into her eyes.

"For the same reason I've ordered my banner not be raised," Hakram replied.

All the way south, the place of honour – the Warlord's place – among the banners had remained empty. The order had seen warriors grumble at the lack of pride, enough that he'd spread among the horde that he would only raise his own banner after Ater was made to kneel. The boast had limited the damage to reputation, and what he'd paid was well worth what he was to get for it now. At his left, Oghuz suddenly let out a loud bark of laughter.

"Look at them, girl," the chief of the Red Shields said. "How thick is their battle line?"

Hakram's eyes returned to the field. When he'd sent out his vanguard of five thousand wolf rider towards the camps to the east of Ater, the nobles in them had understandably reacted to the threat. What troops were not already fighting in the city had been mustered and ordered out, but that effort had ceased as soon as the highborn had glimpsed the banners claiming that Troke Snaketooth was the warlord of the Clans. It was, after all, an open secret among the highest rung of the nobility that Troke was an ally of Malicia's. They were still wary, as the Clans should have gone to sack Nok instead of marched on Ater, but the tension went out of their battle line.

Troke rode forward with a few picked men, champions, and the nobles sent a party of their own. Led by a Niri, by the look of their banners.

Only the vanguard had slowed, not stopped, and the highborn realized it only moments before Troke Snaketooth's warband smashed into their envoys and the packs of wolf riders howled a charge. Some of the mages with the troops got spells up in time, turning back the attack, but not enough. Most of the enemy soldiers had never faced great wolves up close and it showed: the great mount shattered the shield wall in moments and trampled dozens, terror spreading at the violent howls. Maybe eight thousand Praesi had mustered on the field and less than a tenth



of that died under the charge, but their morale broke instantly. The army shattered, entire companies fleeing the monsters and the massive horde they could see approaching in the distance.

"Good," Hakram gravelled. "Oghuz, take ten thousand shields and secure the camps. Capture all the highborn you can, I want bargaining chips."

"Warlord," the old orc replied, hand over heart.

Hakram nodded back, then turned his eye to Sigvin.

"Send word to your grandmother," he said. "I want the Split Tree to oversee the loot. We distribute only when the blades rest."

"It will be done," she replied.

Overseeing the loot was a position of great trust – the old hordes had given it a formal title, one held in great respect – but Hakram meant it as a check as well as a mark of favour. It never made a clan popular for its warriors to be the ones telling other orcs they couldn't drag away the riches they'd just won in battle. Waiting for Sigvin to finish, the Warlord watched the eastern gates in the distance. Three had been open this morning, he'd been told, but now two were closed. Not that Ater's defenders were the ones keeping the third one open: the banner hung on the gatehouses was a vulture holding a skull, Askum's colours.

High Lady Abreha Mirembé was said to have been raised as undead by Catherine at the Battle of Kala and she knew better than to cross her mistress.

Sigvin returned to his side and Hakram sent for Dag Clawtoe, the warrior he'd overtaken as leader of the Howling Wolves and who now led his personal guard. The three of them and two hundred shields set out towards the gate even as the Clans followed, columns of warriors sweeping the highborn camps and approaching the capital. His force was large enough, the Warlord knew, that Abreha would come to greet him personally. Praesi respected force even when it was in the hands of those they considered savages, and the once-Sepulchral was nothing if not pragmatic. Careful, too.

She came out to meet him near the gatehouse with two hundred soldiers of her own, but she had twice that waiting with bows up in the heights. Out of firing range, narrowly, but should Abreha retreat under their cover the ensuing fight would not go well for him. The old witch let out a little noise of amusement when they finally stood face to face.

"No longer Adjutant, I take it?" High Lady Abreha said.

"No longer," the Warlord agreed. "The city?"

"Out of control," she replied. "From the Licosian Gates to the western walls is nothing but giant spiders and things called to kill them. Maybe a fifth of the city is lost, either to flame or damages. The Legions are dug in along the Avenue of Claws and Akua Sahelian is rumoured to be mounting a counterattack, but it's not looking good. "

Hakram snorted.

"Catherine?" he asked.

"Still near the Licosian Gates last I heard, containing the situation with the Hierophant's help," High Lady Abreha replied. "The Army of Callow retreated in good order to the western gates – with civilians along, when they could."

"Quite the mess," Hakram said.

"It is," the old witch smiled. "So what is it that you've come to add, Deadhand? I must confess, it's starting to look like we might no longer be on the same side."

"Oh?"

"Had to fight Dakarai off to keep this gate open," High Lady Abreha said. "I'll need assurances before I let you through it."

Hakram laughed in her face, then let out a sharp whistle. The Aksum household troops tensed, some drawing swords, but his own warriors did not charge. Instead they turned about sharply, beginning to march away. Wary surprise found its way to Abreha's face.

"It need not be anything onerous," the High Lady said. "Just oaths and hostages."

"I won't bargain with you, Abreha," Hakram said. "What I wanted from you was news of the battle, and you have given them to me."

The old woman scoffed.

"So you dragged your horde all the way from the Steppes just to sit out the fall of Ater?" Abreha said. "Try a better lie."

"You misunderstand me," Hakram Deadhand said.

In the distance, there was a great grinding sound. One of two western gates that'd been closed was opening again. The High Lady of Askum's face went blank, hiding her thoughts.

"Why would I cut a deal with you," the Warlord asked, "when I have already done so with High Lady Wither?"

—

Indrani breathed out, nocked her arrow and jumped down.

Flashes of bright light below, scarabs the size of fists burrowing into the flesh of spiders and devils only to explode out in green flame. Distractions, all of it. At the heart of the horde, the house-sized green salamander devil was laying on the broken pedestal of some dead empress and watching it all with its jutting eyes – a spider came a little too close, mouth open in a screech, and the devil's jaw unhinged. Archer smiled. The arrow was in flight before she even knew it, her body moving by itself, and the salamander's lower jaw was nailed down to the stone. Its spiky tongue juttied out as it screamed, impaling the spider, and Indrani landed on her knees just behind the dying creature.

She snatched the spike at the end of the tongue before it could retract, to the devil's hateful screams, and rose to a run. Movement to the left, claws, but she went low and blood splashed on her cloak as a spider died in her stead. A jet of spidersilk brushed against the edge of her shoulder but she was already twisting, leaping – broken stone pillar to the side, base to leap even higher and *fuck* a devil. The coloured toucan the size of a man and made of ivory and fingers clawed at side, pale claws raking at her chain mail, and she was slammed on the side of a wall. She smacked the devil away with her bow, breaking the string, and fell back even quicker when the salamander devil tried to retract its tongue.

The bow went behind her back, just in time for the toucan devil to come back and get a knife in the belly. She wrapped her limbs around it, ignoring the horrid wiggling of the fingers, and used it as a base to throw herself atop the roof. She landed on her side, the salamander devil below screeching words in the Dark Tongue as its tongue kept extending. Almost there, Archer thought. She rolled to the side as a streak of fire tore through the roof tiles where she'd just been, breaking into a running leap at the next roof – in the distance she saw a flash of Light shine and wink out, the Lady shooting Alexis' arrow in flight – and landing just near the edge of the last roof. Just in time for spiders to begin climbing up that edge. She couldn't stop moving, she'd lose the momentum and then she was fucked.

So instead she sped up, and when the fat body full of mandibles went over the edge it was receive her boot in the face as she used it as a base to leap further up. Screeches behind her but she was flying, flying until she hit the wall with a gleeful laugh. The alcove in the tower was just large enough for her to stand in it after the bruising landing, and Indrani wasted no time hammering the tongue spike into it with her bare hand. Once, twice, and in it went. Deep. In the distance the salamander screamed in rage but the spike was stuck in now. Indrani reached

for the vial in her bag, smashing it atop the point where the tongue went into the stone. The black good solidified in moments, making sure it'd be stuck there for good.

"Well," Archer said. "Time to get going."

She climbed up the tower even as began to shake, reaching the top and the wonderful view of the howling hell Ater had turned into just moments before there was a sinister *crack* down below. Indrani moved to the eastern edge, sheathing her knife and taking out a fresh string for her bow. Down below, the Lady still stood on that statue of Terribilis as she toyed with the Silver Huntress. Arrows were shot out in flight, Ranger shot her through cover – even when stone – and twice collapsed a building with a very precise missile as Alexis tried to cross them. The arrows wreathed in silver Light that headed back Ranger's way never made it close. Lexy was too slow to imbue the Light, against reflexes like the Lady's that was as good as not shooting at all.

Archer nocked an arrow, breathed out and loosed. The Lady caught the movement, swayed slightly to the left and the shot that should have gone through her spine instead caught a devil in the face down below. Ranger cocked an eyebrow at her, as if asking whether that was the best Indrani could do. She had yet to stop standing atop the head of the fucking statue she'd been on all this time. Instead of answering, Archer nocked another arrow and grinned. If she wasn't wrong, it ought to be around – a few small cracks, then a massive one as the salamander-devil finally pulled the seven-story high tower down. Which was something of a problem for Indrani, who was standing on top of said tower, but more of a problem for the Lady.

Who the tower was falling *on*.

Whooping in delight, Indrani loosed on the arrow the Lady had just tried to put in her throat and hit the side, deflecting it. Even as she slid down the top of the tower, she nocked and released once more – looking irritated the Lady cut it down, but Alexis had taken the opening. Silver shone bright, clipping the edge of the Lady's shoulder and singeing her cloak. For a moment Ranger looked up, but Indrani realized with a start it wasn't her being looked at. It was the falling tower. One of the windows, more specifically.

"No fucking way," Archer cursed. "You can't possibly be *that* quick."

Just before the tower's roof became a wall, she leapt away and to the side. Even as the building fell onto a mass of spiders and devils she landed through a broken tile roof and into what looked like pack of shelves which were – ow ow, fucking ow – full of bottles. Indrani took a moment to be in pain as the broken shelves and bottles fell on her head, bruised and bloody, and

there was a thunderous sound and cloud of dust as the tower finished falling. Taking an experimental sniff the liquid drenching her, Indrani found it appeared to be wine. Ah, but the Gods did provide. She bit off the cork and took a swallow of what tasted like some red from somewhere, polishing off a third of the bottle because those fucking cuts on her face hurt like a bitch. Well, time to see if the Lady had actually pulled it off.

Indrani left the house only to find the Ranger smugly standing atop the fallen tower, next to what had been a window on the western side.

"Oh *come on*," Archer complained. "Are you telling me you managed to climb and cross the damn thing before it finished falling?"

"The windows on the second level faced each other," the Lady said, amused. "You girls picked the wrong tower to drop."

She paused to slap away a silver arrow.

"Fine," Indrani sighed. "Next one will be bigger, and without fucking windows. You going to say why you were standing on that statue, at least?"

"So I could literally look down on your efforts," the Lady of the Lake informed her.

"Ouch," Indrani said. "In all fairness, you're pretty hard to kill."

"Is that what you're trying?" she smiled. "I thought we were catching up."

"Sure, but we figured it'd be better to catch you then get caught," Indrani noted. "What errand is it you're running for the Carrion Lord, anyway?"

Ranger cocked her head to the side.

"You're stalling," she stated. "Why?"

"Wine hasn't kicked in yet," Indrani replied, raising her bottle.

She threw it a moment later, but it didn't work – the Lady ignored it, instead swatting the arrow without Light that the Silver Huntress had just tried to put in the side of her neck.

"Alexis," Ranger greeted her. "You seem in a mood. Rough day?"

Lexy came out of the house she'd shot through the window of, jaw clenched.

"What is it going to take," the Silver Huntress bit out, "for you to take this *seriously*?"

The Ranger considered her.

"For you to get out of the woods I first found you running in," the Lady said.

Oh boy, Indrani thought. *That* wasn't going to end well. At least their plan had worked, though. Archer wasn't hearing any devils and spiders fighting nearby, so Cocky should be about ready. Alexis took her spear in hand, Light flaring bright.

"I'm going to take that answer out of your fucking hide," the Silver Huntress said.

"You're beginning to bore me," the Ranger noted. "Cocky, won't you stop skulking around long enough say something? Crawling on your belly is no way to live, girl."

Cocky did, in fact, come out of hiding. Atop the rooftop, covered in ash and dust but grinning.

"Me," the Concocter said.

"Pardon?" the Lady said.

"You asked what she was stalling for," Cocky said. "It was for *me*."

She raised her hand, snapping the fingers, and suddenly their surroundings were filled with screams. Every devil and spider that'd been exposed to the charm potions came when called by their new mistress, prepared to kill at her word.

"So *that's* your plan?" the Lady asked. "Swarming me."

"It's a start," the Concocter said.

Ranger snorted, then glanced at Indrani – who'd been nocking an arrow, admittedly.

"I did come here for something," the Lady said. "You were right."

"And what's that?" Archer asked.

Below them the ground began to shake. Not, not shake. Something was... hitting it.

"Let *her* catch my scent," the Ranger replied.

The paved street in front of them was ripped open, a massive leg tearing through it. Merciless Gods, Indrani thought. No, that couldn't be. Wasn't it supposed to be just a story? Another street blew up and slowly, inexorably, a gargantuan shape rose through the foundation of Ater. A spider so large and foul it defied description, shrouded in darkness and venom that dripped

like rain. Her scream, when her hundred thousand eyes found the sun, was deafening. She was sniffing at the air, looking for a scent.

"Dread Emperor Tenebrous," Indrani whispered.

The Lady of Lake smiled at them.

"Now it's a proper fight," Hye Su happily said.

Slowly, she unsheathed her second blade.

"What are you waiting for? Take your shot, kids."

—

"It won't work," High Lady Takisha said, tone frustrated. "My mages say—"

"Yes," Akua impatiently said, "that the sky is too dry because of the previous rains. Which I have a solution to."

"That offensive is suicide," Takisha hissed. "You cannot—"

"My soldiers are at your disposal, Lady Sahelian," High Lord Jaheem mildly said.

Akua passed a tired hand through her hair. It was telling that no one even seemed to notice it: they were all so exhausted and on edge that the usual games had gone by the wayside.

"I need more than soldiers," Akua admitted. "I need at least three mage cabals."

The High Lord of Okoro hesitated.

"I only have two," he admitted. "One of which is of my retinue."

Which he would not part with, considering that there had been two attempts to abduct him today.

"One would be a start," Akua said, glancing at High Lady Takisha.

Who looked away. Akua could not even blame her too much for it. The Kahtan household troops had been so brutalized by the day's fighting that there was barely a third of left of them. All of the Taghreb soldiery had been badly mauled, in truth, but the Kahtan men had led the vanguard and suffered accordingly — first against the Army of Callow, then those damnable spiders.

"I will go," High Lord Dakarai said. "I still have nearly sixty mages, a third of which can touch High Arcana. It ought to be enough, I think."

A moment of surprised silence. He was taking a considerable risk, investing so much of the last strength of his house in such a dangerous undertaking. Nok had been mauled as badly as Kahtan today, losing troops to both Aksum and the spiders. Abreha's treachery had been eminently predictable, but Dakarai's apparent change of sides was rather puzzling considering it had cost him much and might still cost him more.

"It is not certain any of us will return," Akua felt bound to remind him.

"It is not certain any of us will live through the day, if those monsters are not dealt with," High Lord Dakarai flatly replied. "We have already wrecked entire districts failing to contain them, and that was before..."

"Emperor-claimant Tenebrous?" High Lady Takisha suggested.

All of their gazes moved to the hulking shape of the spider near the Licosian Gates, which had already wrecked three fortified positions in its rampage. The lesser spiders had taken advantage to overwhelm the district, killing hundreds of soldiers in the service of Takisha's vassals.

"It ought to be *empress*-claimant, surely," High Lord Jaheem muttered.

"Regardless of the titles, Ater is on the brink," High Lord Dakarai said. "You have my cabals, Lady Sahelian."

They set out as a mixed force, High Lord Jaheem insisting he send his one spare cabal along with soldiers regardless of necessity. It was hard fighting block by block once they passed the fortified positions, swarms spiders attacking from streets and rooftops as the soldiers advanced with tightly locked shields and the mages returned fire. Akua led from the front, trusting Kendi's sorcery to shield her as she went purely on the offensive with the most destructive curses she'd learned as a girl. Two thousand soldiers had set out, four hundred were dead by the time the expedition made it to the massive structure of bronze that she'd been leading it to. A reservoir, one of the largest in Ater.

It fed some of the aqueducts, hence the bronze – it was the easiest metal to enchant – but many of those were now broken and spilling anyway. At the moment it was nothing but an enormous amount of water doing no good to anyone. As the household troops dug in and established a defensive perimeter under constant harassment, Akua organized the cabals into two ritual sequences. The first was easy, requiring a dozen mages only because of the power requirement. Magic was sunk into the water reservoir, then over three heartbeats turned to searing heat: a massive column of vapour blew upwards, high into the sky, as Akua followed with a



measuring spell. It was barely enough water, but it would do. The hail of the last two weeks had filled it to burst, it was the only reason it worked.

The second ritual took every mage left, in hexagonal nodes as power was gathered and sent up into the sky. The clouds began to form after half an hour – almost half the soldiers were dead by then, the spiders attracted by the great bursts of power – but after that it was not long. Dark clouds began crackling with power as Akua sunk deeper into High Arcana than she ever had, finding the runes came to her as if she'd been born with the knowledge. As if she were *meant* to succeed.

Lightning struck the tide of spiders before the main Legion position. Once, then twice. Then four times at once. Then nine. And then a howling column of lightning descended from the sky, like the glare of some ancient god, incinerating arachnids wherever it went. And Akua moved it, power dancing under a darkened sky as the column of lightning moved along the battle lines like a pencil being dragged. Before long the power began to wane, the array began to fight her and the clouds thinned, but Akua pressed on. A little more. If she kept at it little longer, she could end this. Force the spiders to retreat, to spare Ater.

And as her pores began to sweat blood, she smashed the last of the lightning onto the massive shape of the progenitor spider. It screamed and smoked, but rose from the ground soon enough. Akua dropped to the ground, spent.

"It wasn't enough," she panted, falling to her knees.

The last wisps of power slipped through her fingers. Someone approached to help her up, but she waved them away.

"See to those that fell unconscious," she croaked out. "And prepare for the retreat. We're done here."

None gainsaid her. They looked at her with fear in the eyes, she thought, but something like hunger too. It had been a long time since Ater had seen sorcery the likes of which had just been unleashed. Within moments Akua was alone in the warm cradle of bronze, even Kendi having gone. Only the sound of her breath kept her company as her heartbeat slowed. Gods, but she wanted to sleep. To close her eyes and wake up in Hainaut, still damned but without having to look it in the eye.

"*Goddamn*, but she did a number on you."

Akua's eyes fluttered open. Before her, leaning against the wall, a woman stood with a silver flask in hand. Hanging off her back was a run-down lute.

"I've been around for a while, darling, and I'm still impressed by how thoroughly Cat got into your head," the Wandering Bard said. "It's fucking magnificent work, pun intended. Terrible too, but that does tend to be the way with our girl yeah?"

"Go away," Akua croaked out.

"Nah," the Bard casually dismissed. "We're going to have a talk, you and I. Her plan has been working pretty much perfectly, which is why it's time for me to tell you a few truths and send that off into the void."

"I will not-"

"We're going to have a talk," the Wandering Bard grinned, "about exactly what it is that Catherine Foundling has planned for you."

—

"I couldn't get my hands on High Lord Jaheem," High Lady Wither said. "He goes nowhere without a full mage cabal since his daughter was assassinated and my ambush was fought off."

"We captured two of his children and much of his extended family outside the city," Hakram replied. "It will have to serve."

Getting the High Lord of Okoro to cede some of his territory was not going to be easy, but so long as the Tower was kept out of it the Clans had the stronger bargaining position. Hostages would only improve that, though exacting it as ransom from the man himself would have been easiest. Still, disappointing as the failure was it was not surprising: if High Lords were easy to capture, they would not be High Lords. Hakram looked away from Pickler's mother and down to the city, where the unfolding battle could well be seen from the gatehouse where they stood. The staggering feat of magic that could only have been the work of Akua Sahelian had turned the tide.

The lightning storm had torn through thousands of the spiders and sent many skittering back to their hiding places below. There were still pockets of fighting between soldiers and beasts but much fewer, and already it could be seen that the Legions were going on the offensive to clear out the still-infested districts. Down south was less promising, where the High Lady of Kahtan held command and most highborn armies had gathered. The hulking silhouette of what had to be the progenitor of the infestation beneath Ater was rampaging around the Licosian Gates, swatting away at storm elementals and devils. Giant spiders were gathering to her, as if they were being called.

"It will be time to move soon," the Warlord said.

"The longer we let Takisha bleed the better," High Lady Wither smiled.

"Short-sighted," Hakram said. "We'll need those armies as fodder when we fight Keter and their nobles to handle the Hellgates. If it's truly the Carrion Lord behind this insurgency of spiders, he disappoints me: thousands died today that could have been put to better use."

"It's him," Wither quietly said. "And he's not done, mark my words."

Hakram did not ask how she knew. It would have been impolite and she would not have told him regardless.

"It does not change the need to act," he said. "I want the west of the capital firmly under our control by the time the dust settles."

"Abreha will take the safe passage to outside the city when you offer it," High Lady Wither mused. "She's not going to fight us for the gate, not when it already cost her keeping Dakarai away from it. She'll move her camp to the Army of Callow's side and stop pretending she ever switched sides. It's Sargon that's going to be a problem."

"On that we agree," the Warlord growled.

Sargon Sahelian had contributed to the defence of the capital, but most of his troops had stayed near the central districts that surrounded the Tower. Giving him the boot would not be trouble given the size of Hakram's army, but the Sahelian was sharing those positions with the Sentinels – and Hakram was hesitant to tangle with those at the moment. Whoever first cornered Malicia would be mauled by the Tower's arsenal, that was a role best passed to another. It was why he'd ordered his chiefs to seize the west of the city but go no further. The wealthy camps outside the city would sate the hunger for plunder for now, enough his warriors would not sack the capital against his orders.

"We'll test their will to stand their ground with a few skirmishes," High Lady Wither decided.

"I'm not above burning them out if I have to," Hakram bluntly said. "We need to hold the avenues and barricade them if we're going to keep the nobles wedged between us and the Army of Callow."

Which was the only way he'd get them to bend without outright sacking Ater, he figured. If they had room to maneuver they'd try to run rings around him, decide they could wait out his horde. But so long as they were stuck in the capital between his host and another enemy, stripped of their supplies and at the Tower's

feet, they could be made to bend. It was either that or a massacre, which would weaken his army and taint the concessions he was here to force. Wither was in the same boat as him, which was why she'd been willing to ally: her title had been granted by Malicia, which meant it was worth less than dust the moment Malicia lost her throne. To ensure she was not thrown to the wolves by whoever succeeded the Empress, it been well worth opening a gate into the city.

One hundred thousand orcs were a heavy argument in any negotiation.

Their conversation was interrupted by a messenger, which turned out to be for the both of them. Letters with the Tower's seal. Already checked for poison and curses. Hakram opened his own, scanning the lines, and let out a bark of laughter. Well, let it not be said that Malicia lacked audacity.

"I assume you got the same as me?" he asked.

"An invitation to a formal session of the imperial court tomorrow," Wither said, eyes narrowed. "Malicia is playing a game again. She still thinks she can live through this."

Hakram snorted. Catherine wanted the woman's head on a pike, and given the situation she was quite likely to get it. There were few people left in Praes who wanted to keep the empress alive – it was more an issue of no one wanting to be the one to kill her. Cornered foxes bit deepest. The two of them left the wall to begin their preparations for the push into the city, but once more he was interrupted. This time by Dag, who quietly told him there was a messenger from the Army of Callow. The Warlord's hand tightened. It had only been a matter of time, he knew.

Somehow he'd still been hoping to avoid it for a little longer.

The man had been led to a house on the other side of the street and kept under guard. Hakram wasted no time getting there, finding the officer was looking outside the window when he entered. The tall orc frowned. Something was wrong here. These were lieutenant's stripes, Catherine would have sent someone higher up for an important message. The human turned, unclasping the straps of his helmet and setting it down on the table, revealing greying hair and green eyes.

"Good afternoon, Warlord," the Carrion Lord said.

Hakram's dead hand clenched.

"You are not here on Catherine's behalf," the Warlord said.

The older man conceded the point with a slight nod.

"So what is it you want, Amadeus of the Green Stretch?" the Warlord asked.

"I come," the devil said, "to offer you a bargain."

## **Interlude: Strangest And Most Solemn**

*"It is true it would be safer, Chancellor, to refrain from gloating. But then why even bother? If I can't crucify whoever speaks in accidental rhyme or throw heroes to three-headed snakes or feed a baby to another baby, then why should I even want to be Dread Emperor?"*

– Dread Emperor Revenant

The Carrion Lord was a greying swordsman without a sword or a Name, trapped in a small room with an armed Named orc almost twice his weight. The warriors outside the door held no loyalty to him and this entire district of Ater was under the rule of the Clans. He was completely at the Warlord's mercy by almost every way of measuring the situation that the tall orc knew.

Hakram had not felt this wary of someone in years.

"A bargain," the Warlord repeated.

"Indeed," the green-eyed man agreeably replied.

There were no windows to the room, only a ragged tapestry of black and white hung on the wall and a faded magelight set in the wall – old enough its glow dimmed for stretches of time before burning bright again, moving shadows across the wall. Back and forth, like fingers clawing at stone. Amadeus of the Green Stretch looked calm, but then that was his legend. The story went that Istrid – not yet Knightsbane – had bit down on his wrist until her fangs tasted blood to see if he'd flinch and he'd not batted an eye. *A hand for you would have been a worthwhile trade*, the Carrion Lord had claimed. *What was there to flinch from?*

No wonder the Red Shields still loved him like a fucking lost son.

Hakram's first instinct was to kill him, here and now. Lunge across the table and smash his soft human skull against the wall, rip out his throat and let the lifeblood spill red on that mangled weave of black and white. But that was the red in him, the part that hated feeling wary of a man in his power and wanted to destroy the source of that discomfort. The Warlord picked the sentiment apart, looked for the sliver of sense at the source of it. It was, he eventually decided, that he did not like or trust the former Black Knight.

In a distant way he recognized that the Carrion Lord was half of the pair that'd done more for his people on half a century than their predecessors in a millennium, but that was not something he could connect to the pale-skinned man in front of him. The deed was too large, too looming, to be tied to someone of flesh and blood. Instead the parts that came to the fore were the human ones, the glimpses he'd had through Catherine over the years. None of these particularly endeared Amadeus of the Green Stretch to Hakram. Yet that dislike was his own, not the Warlord's, and so he swallowed it.

He would not close the door, listen to the fear. But neither would he pretend to be deaf.

"We have not spoken much over the years, you and I," Hakram said.

Maybe a dozen conversations when Catherine was not there, none longer than the time to took to boil a cup of tea.

"You were the Adjutant," the Carrion Lord simply said. "It was not my place to trespass."

Hakram bared his teeth.

"I always did despise it the most," he said, "the way that you always give her what she wants, but only ever in ways that benefit you."

When she'd been a girl still, all swagger and distrust and fear, Catherine had wanted... room to grow. Support but from a distance, the kind of help that would allow her to still believe herself bound to nothing save her own ambitions. And she'd gotten it: her own legion, Masego and Indrani, opportunities to prove herself with no one standing above her. Only the legion had bound her to Praes, the children of the Calamities to their legacy and every victory had advanced the plans of the pale man seated across from him. A hook in every gift, and there had been *many*.

"That is who I am," the Carrion Lord replied, neither proud nor ashamed. "I am long past the days of fighting it."

"It would not be as obscene, if you did not genuinely love her," Hakram said.

"I did not mean to," Amadeus of the Green Stretch admitted. "But once I saw the anger that burned like a torch, it was water down the slope. Inexorable."

"What you did today will rip back open the wounds you left after the Doom," Hakram gravelled. "How many thousands did you burn today? So much for the coming of the Age of Order."

Green eyes studied him coolly.

"Are you certain that is a conversation you wish to have, *Adjutant?*"

The tall orc clicked his fangs. He had not forgotten what Tariq Fleetfoot had told him as Hainaut broke around them, but what had once been a comfort was now a noose around his neck. Not that he would allow himself to be cowed by the other man's turn of phrase.

"What must be settled between she and I will be," Hakram said. "Do not pretend understanding of it, any more than I could claim understanding of what lay between you and Scribe. It is... personal. Your madness is not."

The green-eyed man leaned back in his seat, looking amused. Hakram itched to take an eye for it, just so that he'd be forever half as nonchalant.

"My madness?" the pale man asked.

"You fed thousands of civilians to blood-mad critters," the Warlord said. "You weakened armies needed against Keter and broke the capital. You sit here as if it makes you a victor, but all I see in you is a Dread Emperor as this land has known by the hundreds. Why should I bargain with the likes of you?"

"Because none of these were accidents," the Carrion Lord calmly replied.

Hakram paused. Killed the scorn on his tongue, the easy comment that if anything that only worsened his impression of the other man. Perhaps that would still be true later, but first he would think it through. See why a largely intelligent man would think this reasonable to say here and now. That meant looking at the deeds and going back, methodically. *What is there to gain by today?* Hakram considered the blood, for often that was where the truth of things lay. And from a cold eye this Battle of the Spiders, not quite yet finished, had bled the High Lords and Ladies the most.

Of soldiers, yes, but not so many as that. Of the thirty thousand that had first gathered outside Ater at least twenty thousand should still remain and most the dead would be levies. The household troops had lost but not been crippled. No, the cost had been subtler. The High Seats had ruined their reputation with Ater when they sacrificed almost a quarter of the city to contain the spiders, their devils and wonders killing almost as many as the monsters come from below. If any of them tried to claim the Tower, the city would riot. That would not necessarily stop them from trying, but history taught that a tyrant without Ater's affection rarely lasted long in the Tower.

*Only Ater is half a ruin now*, Hakram thought, *so that doesn't matter as much*. Love could be bought with food and shelter provided to refugees and the disposed, not that it would be sustainable in the long term. Hakram had experience with matters like this, having once handled the masses of refugees in southern Callow after the Doom and Summer's depredations. The tent-cities had eventually broken up, leaving smaller towns behind as the people moved away to – Hakram paused. Not an accident, the Carrion Lord had claimed. Not the destruction, not the deaths, not even the gargantuan spider unleashed on the Licosian Gates.

"You are destroying Ater," the Warlord said. "Emptying it for good."

"Are you familiar with the Haunted Scholar's works?" the Carrion Lord asked.

Hakram was and admitted as much with a nod. The man had claimed in his treatises that the instability at the heart of Praes came from the weakness of the Tower relative to the High Seats. Three burdens in particular had been identified. The Legions of Terror, which were dependent on taxes paid by nobles for their upkeep, the asymmetric accretion of power – Dread Emperors were individuals, had to build their power as individuals from scratch when they rose, while the High Seats were dynasties with permanent seats of power – and most importantly of all the capital itself. Ater, the behemoth city that could not feed itself or pay for its own upkeep or close its gates to its enemies.

"I suppose it is a sort of madness," the Carrion Lord conceded. "But it is a methodical one. Ater must be reduced to a sustainable size if Praes is ever to be free of constant civil strife."

The Haunted Scholar's thesis on display. If Ater could not be held without the support of a High Seat then civil war was inevitable because the Tower was certain to be bound in the dynastic disputes of its backer.

"You haven't solved the other two," the Warlord said.

"The days is young," the pale man smiled. "Shall we discuss a bargain, then?"

Hakram wanted to deny him. The Warlord considered it. It was an intricate plan, weakening the High Seats in several ways and attending to a deeper issue with a single stroke. Not the kind that someone lost to the old ways would be capable of conceiving. And that meant, regrettably, that Amadeus of the Green Stretch was still worth hearing out.

"Speak," the Warlord ordered.



"There are three plans afoot in the capital that are not ours," the Carrion Lord said. "Your intentions for the Clans cannot cohabit with any of them succeeding."

"Bold claim," Hakram growled.

"Malicia intends to stand as Dread Empress when the ashes have cooled," the pale man calmly said. "To do this, she has driven every High Seat to such hatred of the others that none will tolerate another to rise to claim the Tower. All the while, she sunk a great deal of her remaining resources in ensuring that Akua Sahelian would be crowned empress in her stead. She intends, I imagine, to peacefully abdicate."

"Even if Sahelian spared her, her supporters wouldn't tolerate the loose end," the Warlord pointed out.

"Which doesn't matter, because Malicia believes that Catherine will kill the Doom of Liesse the moment she dares to claim the throne," the Carrion Lord said. "Putting the empire in an... interesting situation."

It took a moment for Hakram to put all the pieces in place properly. Sahelian dead, the High Seats livid at the offence but too deeply feuding to be able to raise one of their own instead. It would leave only one person with enough prominence to fill the seat, wouldn't it? Malicia herself, not an hour gone from the throne and yet somehow made into the compromise candidate. And Catherine might want to kill her, but would the High Seats stand for it? Killing one empress would have them furious enough, two would be beyond the pale. Subjugation in all but name.

It might cost her the armies she'd come here to claim, the diabolists she needed.

"It won't work," the Warlord said.

"No," the Carrion Lord agreed. "It is an outstanding piece of scheming on Malicia's part, but it falls apart because she failed to properly grasp the nature of Akua Sahelian."

"And you have?" Hakram derided.

"No," the man easily replied, "but I understand Catherine and that is quite enough. She would not tolerate the owner of the Folly to rule Praes, no matter the nature of the deeper game she is playing with Tasia's daughter. Which brings us to my daughter and her own plan, beginning with the crucial moment where Akua Sahelian will refuse the throne she is offered."

He'd never heard the man claim Catherine as his daughter so openly. It felt like nails on chalk, for all that Catherine

returned the favour from her side regularly. Somehow Hakram doubted either had ever spoken the words face-to-face.

"I know what Catherine plans," the Warlord said.

He had no need to hear out a plan he'd helped make, though he was certain changes would have been made since he'd left for the Steppes.

"Which is why you are not acting hand-in-hand with her," the Carrion Lord calmly noted. "You already know that your leverage against the Tower depends on being someone whose support can be courted against her."

The Warlord did not deny it. If he entered the Tower as Catherine's ally, he lost all bargaining power. The Clans became a chip on her side of the table, not players in their own right. It lost him the great influence he would be wielding in there as the only person left in the empire with an army on the field that could give the Army of Callow pause. Beyond that, he would lose the influence he would need to bend the Grand Alliance to make the concessions he needed. Much as the pale man irked him, he was not wrong. He could not go along with Catherine tomorrow.

"And the third?" the Warlord grunted.

"The Intercessor wants Catherine dead and Praes a pit of civil war, as far as I can tell," the other man shrugged. "Her means are still opaque to me, save that she will moving through Named and pivots. Still, I don't believe that you could ever ally with the Wandering Bard."

"And so that leaves you," the Warlord said. "Or so you would like me to believe."

"Indeed," the Carrion Lord cheerfully replied.

"Only I could speak with Malicia instead," the Warlord said. "Or back a High Seat against the others."

Malicia was the best candidate, save in the sense that Catherine would set fire to the Tower rather than to allow her to rule a latrine pit, much less Praes itself. Hakram was still deciding how heavily that should weight on the scales, given that he might be in a position to strongarm the issue. He was not alone in this. High Lady Wither, his closest ally, had been clear that she would personally prefer Malicia as ruler even if she was open to other candidates. Neither of them were eager to lend a hand to the man seated across the table, even knowing he was likely the most acceptable candidate to the Grand Alliance.

Hakram was able to separate his dislike from the necessities of the situation, so his reluctance was not personal. Amadeus of the

Green Stretch, while popular with the Legions and the people of some regions of Praes, would not be uncontested as ruler. He was a Duni and he'd spent most of his career as the Black Knight rabidly at odds with the same nobility whose support he would need to govern, which was far from ideal. The Carrion Lord was an able enough man that Hakram believed he would be able to make the High Seats fall into line, but he also believed that achieving this would take several years and a fairly brutal war.

A war they did not have time to wage and which would draw heavily on the resources of his supporters. Neither Hakram nor Wither were particularly eager to bleed their people for that purpose. Jaheem Niri was likely their best bet, like it or not – they could trade the territorial concessions Hakram wanted and the assurances Wither wanted for their support, which he could not claim the Tower without.

"You could," the Carrion Lord said. "Only it won't get you what you want for your people."

The Warlord bared his fangs.

"And what would you know about that?"

"Enough," the pale man said. "You were seen to use both the Red Shields and the Split Tree as lieutenants outside the city, which means you're threading the needle between the clans that want closer ties and those that want to distance themselves. You're after major concessions from the Tower while aiming to remain part of Praes."

Hakram's dead hand clenched. Only a handful of people in all of the empire could have derived the same conclusions from seeing what the man had, he reminded himself. His intentions were not obvious for everyone to see.

"You tread dangerous grounds," the Warlord warned.

"It's habit by now," the Carrion Lord smiled. "My point stands, regardless. Even if you can back someone to seize the Tower and they fulfill the bargain you struck, it won't get you what you want."

"And why is that?" the Warlord gravelled.

"Because their successor will have no incentive to keep the bargain," he replied.

"War against the united Clans-"

"Will be the *selling point* of breaking faith," the Carrion Lord coldly cut in. "You know your histories, Warlord. How many tyrants continued the policies of the predecessor they murdered?"

How many of them immediately threw themselves into a war with Callow or the Free Cities or any enemy at hand because a fight against a common enemy would solidify their grip on the empire?"

It had the sting of truth, but also of the inevitable.

"That is Praes," the Warlord said.

"That is the Dread Empire," the Carrion Lord challenged.

Hakram almost laughed.

"What else is there?"

"A bargain to make," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said.

The Warlord scoffed. Arrogance.

"Why would your successor be better than anyone else's?"

"Because I do not intend to be Dread Emperor," the pale man calmly said.

The Warlord paused. Narrowed his eyes.

"So what is it you do want?" Hakram Deadhand asked.

"Your help," he said, "and a single favour."

It sounded too good a bargain, the Warlord thought.

"Do not be relieved," the Carrion Lord mildly said. "The favour, I think, will be for you the heavier of the costs to bear."

Dead fingers made by a now dead man clenched.

"Tell me," the Warlord ordered.

—

Archer feinted to the left, then hastily drew back when the blade came a hair's breadth away from her neck – she felt the very point scrape her skin – and shifted to the side only to eat a pommel in the stomach. Even through the mail she bent, gasping in pain as the Ranger moved around her so the Silver Huntress blow would go wide.

"Indrani," Alexis hissed, "get out of-"

She never finished the sentence, the two of them seeing the movement coming from the corner of their eye. The leapt away before the leg tore through the house whose roof they had been fighting on, Tenebrous scattering the stone walls like they were made of parchment and dripping darkness everywhere. Like pools of ink the dark tainted whatever it touched, spreading down slopes

and through crevices. Twice now Indrani had seen devils fall through a large patch as if it were a hole. Cocky had said that Tenebrous was living domain, but Archer had her doubts. Althea Maronid's research in Ashur had decisively proved that a domain must be internal if it belonged to a living creature, else it would cause uncontrolled creational cascades.

More likely Tenebrous' domain was physically incarnated and static, somewhere far below Ater, and she was trying to bring it up here by spreading around that darkness clinging to her hide. On the bright side, that meant climbing on top of the spider wouldn't be like stepping over one of the pools: if the domain was external it wouldn't work on the creature herself.

Looking through the clouds of dust and raining darkness, Archer looked for the Lady's shape. Alexis had gone the other way, but neither of them were getting – oh, shit, she'd climbed the leg. And ol' Tenebrous wasn't liking that at all, by the deafening sounds of her screeching. What few windows in the neighbourhoods hadn't been broken all exploded, and a few devils actually died. Indrani fought through the pain, then blinked as a large, winged devil with purple veins landed before her in a crouch. Cocky was offering a ride, huh? No point in declining. The devil needed a knife in the side to be guided properly, but even as Light lit up the sky and flew out in an arrow – the Lady had to stop and shoot it down – Indrani flew ahead.

The Lady killed her mount with a second arrow a heartbeat later, but Alexis had bought her long enough: she leapt off the dying devil, landing on Tenebrous' back. The monster did not like that at all, not only starting to screech and trying to shake her off but doing... something with its body. The thick darkness she'd been stepping through turned from a misty cloud to something thicker, like mud, and the hair beneath her boots hardened like iron into a forest of needles. Fuck, that wasn't going to be fun to fight on but it wasn't like she had a choice: in a matter of moments the Lady had finished climbing up the leg and was looking at her from her a hundred feet away.

Now Archer just needed to distract her long enough that Alexis would be able to make it up here without getting shot.

Rolling her shoulders to loosen them, Indrani took calm steps forward. The longknives the same woman she was not fighting had gifted her in hand, the scarf they had taken together in Mercantis around her neck, she began to move quicker. Indrani didn't like thinking when the blades were out, not more than she needed to, but her mind was ajar. Asking questions like why she was doing this, what there was to win. Alexis wanted to kill the Lady, that was no mystery, and Cocky wanted to... get even somehow. But why was Indrani here, dragged into this? Cat had asked her to find out what Ranger would be up to, and she'd found out: baiting

out a huge fucking spider monster near the fortified positions of the High Lady of Kahtan. Job done, not great but still done.

So why was she breaking into a run, measuring the distance between her and her teacher?

The blades sang, steel on steel. Parry, riposte, spin. The footing shifted on them, Tenebrous raging at their presence, but even as the world shifted and great towers crashed around them they kept striking. To miss a beat was to lose, perhaps even to die. Indrani found she was smiling through her scarf. So was the Lady, for a while, but it did not last. Indrani was falling behind. She kept coming in close to make her knives count, to go against the length of Ranger's swords, but it wasn't enough. The Lady did not fall for feints, and when Indrani ignored what she had thought to be one she nearly lost an eye. Blood began to pour down the side of her head, kept out of her eye only by her eyebrow.

"You've improved," the Ranger said.

"I don't know if you have," Archer admitted.

It might, she thought, be why she was fighting in the first place. To see if she could reach the end of Ranger's skill. Whether or not she beat the other woman didn't matter that much to her. It wouldn't really mean anything, even if it ended in death. But knowing where she stood compared to the only person she had really wanted to measure herself up against? That was worth the blood. The Ranger studied her for a beat, slapping aside a cut from the side and forcing Indrani back with the riposte, then scoffed.

"Your mindset is still lacking," the Ranger said.

Archer grit her teeth, feinted to the side – ignored – and with the flat of her other blade tried to throw darkness in the Lady's face. It was cut through, and only a desperate half-step kept Indrani from losing half her face. The cut went deep, from just below her right eye to her jaw. If it'd been any deeper bone would have been scraped.

"Light as a feather," the Lady of the Lake said.

Indrani licked away the blood pooling against her upper lip and went on the attack again. Aggressive, forcing a lock of blades and when Ranger pushed her back she tried to slide under. It got her a kick on the chin for her trouble, but she'd expected that – Cat did the same, because the Carrion Lord did the same and he'd learned it from the Lady – and she caught it with crossed blades. The Lady was forced back, one leg in the air, and Indrani lunged forward with both blades. Only to take another kick on the side of the head, tumbling against the ground with a grunt of pain.

The Lady stabbed down at her shoulder, chipping the mail and finding flesh beneath before withdrawing so Indrani's swipe would hit only air.

"Heavy as a mountain," Ranger finished. "You must be one or the other. Anything in between is wasted time."

"That one's an old lesson," Archer rasped out, rising to her feet.

"Yes," the Lady coldly said. "You should have learned it by now. I thought going out into the world would temper you, but I seem to have been mistaken. Instead you've spent your time fucking Amadeus' apprentice and playing house with Wekesa's boy. It's disappointing."

Indrani held back a flinch.

"I've done more than that," she bit out.

"You have done things," the Lady dismissed, "but you have not *improved*. Your mindset was not refined, your experiences did not broaden your horizons. Do you even have a reason to be fighting me?"

Archer opened her mouth.

"Do not offer me empty words, Indrani," Hye Su warned. "Those I would take an insult."

Archer's mouth closed. It felt childish, while facing those eyes and those blades, to speak of understanding where she stood. Of comparison between them. Like she was a child going around in adult's clothing.

"I thought as much," Ranger sighed. "Go on, get out of here. I will see if the others have grown and deal with you later."

Fuck, Indrani thought. Was the Lady right? It felt like she was. What was Archer even doing here? She'd just let Alexis and Cocky talk her into this because she felt bad about how they'd been back in Refuge, gone along with this stupid idea because of guilt she should have left behind long ago. Baggage like that was best left behind, she'd known that for years. Why was she saddling herself with it now? She'd been with Masego and Catherine too long, gotten too comfortable. She was forgetting what the real world was like.

"I-"

The silver arrow of Light thrummed with power, but it was not so swift that the Lady did not bat it aside. The Silver Huntress was already putting away her bow, short spear in hand with a snarl on her face. Indrani, though, did not move. The image had been

seared into her eyes. The Lady of the Lake, knee-deep in darkness and armed with nothing but steel parrying that blinding burst of Light. Casually, as if she had never even considered she wouldn't be able to do it. No delay, no hesitation, no questioning. Indrani had forgot what it was like, seeing the Lady in her element. Seeing who she was.

Action without doubt.

Archer attacked. She could not leave, even if she struggled to articulate why. To think of it. Blood went down her face, down her neck, but her knives did not slow. It was flashes of movement, of sight. Ranger parrying a spear and blade with a hand each, spinning to carve through Alexis' skull – hitting hair instead, cutting through, but only narrowly. Strands of red flew as steel shone in the sun, Indrani's knife finding mail and skidding against it as an elbow snapped back her chin. She fell but Alexis struck, hammering down, and while Ranger caught the spear burning with Light she had to take a steadying step back.

Devils began to land around them, croaking dark calls.

Tenebrous tried to shake them off again, so Indrani caught a glimpse of the blade as it came down. The elf stood behind Ranger, hacking at her neck, but she went low. A jab at the Emerald Sword's chest as the strike went wide, their silhouette shivering. The blow touched nothing but mist, but as it reformed a step back it lost an eye to a perfectly timed follow-up lunge. The elf retreated, another shimmering into view at their side to cover them, and Ranger let out a laugh.

"Where are the other rest, Noon?" she asked. "It'll take more than you two to make this interesting."

"Careful what you ask for."

A vial hit the ground and there was a small tinkling sound, like a bell being rung, that shivered across the darkness. Above them, riding a scaled devil with great wings, Cocky was glaring harshly. The darkness on Tenebrous' back began to thicken, then move. Spin and roil, like angry snakes.

"Concocter," Ranger greeted her. "Still relying on others to do the heavy lifting, I see."

"Freeze," Cocky answered.

Nothing was happening, Indrani thought, but a look told her that neither the elves nor Ranger seemed to agree. They were all having to rip out their feet from the darkness, as if it'd suddenly turned solid. The Concocter grinned.

"Burn," she hissed.



The great spiders let out a scream that sounded like a laugh, and darkness billowed up in great columns of smoke. Indrani cursed, since it might not hurt her but the dark sure as Hells broke her line of sight, and broke into a run. She found Alexis, whose Light-wreathed spear was keeping the darkness at bay and they set out in pursuit together. They found an Emerald Sword, entirely by accident: they were looking the other way swung blindly backwards at Indrani's head when she approached. She parried the blow narrowly, gritting her teeth as she was somehow driven back one-handed from behind, but the moment Alexis stepped in the fight was over.

The elf stared at her with their too-wide eyes, wrinkling their nose in distaste, then vanished into the darkness.

"Right," Indrani breathed out. "They say they're Good, so they don't fight heroes."

"Doesn't make them less pricks, but at least they're fighting Ranger," Alexis grunted. "What was she talking to you about anyway?"

Indrani hesitated.

"Nothing," she said.

Alexis frowned, then went for her side and pressed a cloth against her hand.

"Wipe your face," she said. "The blood's everywhere."

Archer's teeth grit. She knew the gesture was not condescending, that she was not being coddled. And still she curtly threw the cloth back at the Silver Huntress.

"I can handle myself," she bit out.

Without waiting for an answer she pressed forward. They found Ranger only when then burning darkness began to disperse, already fighting two Emerald Swords. The same, different ones? It was impossible to tell, quick as they moved. Indrani glanced at Alexis, whose face was hard-set, and without a word they attacked. Archer's hand went for the vial Cocky had given her earlier, staying back as the Silver Huntress joined the melee. It was hard to follow the movements, but Archer steeled herself and waited. When she did strike out, it was a wild blow at Ranger's back – who parried the blade, frowning, but only too late saw the other blow.

Smashing the vial against the Lady's neck wouldn't have worked, so Indrani instead crushed the glass in her hand, ensuring most of the liquid within sprayed on the back of Ranger's neck. Almost as much soaked her hand and arm, though, and immediately she

began to retreat. Already she could feel the world quickening around her, her pulse going wild.

"Cocky," she screamed. "I need an antidote."

She felt something burn across her belly, her chain mail giving, but it was all... distant. When she came back to herself the Concocter was feeding her something from a green vial, frowning. Indrani swallowed, throat gone dry.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"Almost," Cocky sighed. "I took enough that Alexis almost cut off her arm at the shoulder, but then she retreated."

Archer looked down, realized that she was still standing on Tenebrous' back. Only it was no longer moving.

"Is it..."

"Not sure if it's her or the Emerald Swords that killed it," Cocky said. "Either way it's dead. I had to lift you off with devils while it trashed, it got ugly."

"And the Lady?" Indrani asked.

"She cut out the drug from herself," the Concocter grimaced. "The concept of it. I had no idea she could even do that. Seems to have cost her, though, she's been slower since."

"Good," Archer grunted. "I can head back into the fight, then. Is she handling the elves?"

Cocky shook her head.

"They retreated after she wounded a few," she replied. "They'll be back, I'm sure, but it's supposed to take them a while to make their wounds disappear. My bet is we'll get all ten when they reappear."

"Lovely," Indrani drawled. "Which way?"

"Follow me," Cocky said. "I just held back to take care of you."

Indrani bit down on the sharp answer at the tip of her tongue. Cocky hadn't meant it that way. It was not a difficult trip, now that Tenebrous no longer move. The two of them were righting atop at tower against which a great leg was resting, flashed of Light searing the afternoon sky. Alexis was looking worst for wear, bleeding from her gut and a leg, but the Lady still had a grievous wound on her right arm. That had to slow her down, even if it looked like she could still use it some. Indrani went in straight while Cocky took a long war around, aiming to keep out of sight. Alexis was driven back with a cut on her face while the

Ranger cast a look her way, cocking an eyebrow as Indrani arrived.

"Back, I see," the Lady said.

"Yup," Indrani shrugged, limbering her wrists.

"And more settled," Ranger said, eyes narrowing.

"I guess it's just clicking into place, now that I've seen you again," Archer said.

The dark-haired woman, after a long moment, smiled.

"You have found something," she said, sounding pleased.

"I used to think I wanted to be like you," Indrani said. "But that's not it, not really. I get that now."

"So what is it you do want?" the Lady of the Lake asked.

"I want to be the Ranger," Indrani said. "I think I've wanted it for a long time, actually. I just couldn't admit it."

"It's not something just anyone can claim," the Lady of the Lake calmly said.

"That's fine," Indrani grinned. "It just means being better than you, and that's the point in the first place."

"Indrani, what the Hells are you talking about?" Alexis snarled.

"It's not wrong, how she raised us," Archer said, to the Huntress' visible fury. "It's not right either, though. And I think I'd do it differently in her place, *so I will.*"

The Lady laughed, sounding genuinely amused.

"You've claimed, Indrani," the Ranger smiled. "Now follow through."

It was the storm, after that. They were all bleeding and tired and slowing down, but one would not have known it from the blades. Indrani had never fought more aggressively, not even against the Saint of Swords, but she could feel it. The **Flow**. It was in her blood, in the pounding of her feet against the tiles. And it came to her as naturally as breathing, so easily she'd not even noticed she was slipping into the aspect. Ranger struggled with that, to the extent that she focused on Alexis in an effort to take her out first. Indrani cushioned the first blow for the Huntress with her own shoulder, letting the mail eat it, but the second was at the wrong angle and... a devil took it instead.

Cocky's eyes were wild as she stood behind Ranger, hand moving as she threw a red vial at her back, but the Lady must have heard her. The devil had tipped her off. She was swinging backwards, through the vial but Indrani's Name pulsed. It would be more than that, the angle of it and the strength... Cocky would die. It would go through her skull. But through the kill the Lady was making a mistake – there would be no coming back in time, no last moment parry. If Indrani struck now, struck at the right place, then she could win. Not a kill, maybe, but enough that Ranger would be forced to retreat. And in the heartbeat where that all sunk in, she saw the same realization harden in Hye Su's eyes. There Indrani saw the expectation of defeat. Would it be enough to claim the Name, to make her the Ranger?

No, she thought. But it would be the first step. The most important one.

Indrani felt like screaming. She wanted this. Wanted it badly enough to fight. So why was Cocky getting in the way? She needed to think, to weigh it up, but there was *no time* and her body moved on its own. The blow went for the arm, the one that would have carved through the Concocter's face, and Indrani froze in surprise even as Ranger spun away and threw Alexis at her. They fell in a tangle of limbs, pushing each other off even as Cocky backed away from the Ranger with naked fear on her face. She'd gone pale as snow.

"Disappointing," Ranger sighed. "All three of you. Anger but no control. Hatred but no discipline. And most disappointing of all, desire with no will behind it. None of you learned a thing."

Indrani offered her arm, dragging Alexis up, and the two of them moved shoulder to shoulder.

"Cocky, stay behind us," the Huntress said.

"She's done playing around," Archer agreed.

"I am," the Lady of the Lake agreed. "And if all these years have not made the lessons stick, this time I will have to leave a permanent reminder."

Well, that didn't sound great, Indrani thought. Only before anyone began to move, the sun dimmed around them. Something enormous was looming just at the edge of their senses as Indrani heard the distant cawing of crows. Besides them, Tenebrous shivered. Still dead. No longer unmoving. All of them glanced to the side, to the rising gargantuan shape of the creature, and found a woman standing atop it. Looking down at them as she leaned on a staff of dead wood. Her cloak was one of many colours, and Catherine Foundling looked down at the Ranger with a hard smile.

"Dodge," the Black Queen said, and the Lady's eyes widened.

A heartbeat later half the tower was gone, Tenebrous' leg gone straight through it, and Indrani found that she couldn't help laughing.

This wasn't over but, Hells, at least they'd all live to see tomorrow.

—

"You know," the Intercessor said, "I always kind of liked you, Akua."

Ah, the familiar grounds of being lied to by an eldritch abomination with sinister intentions. If there were comfortable cushions, candied dates and a dozen dead bodies it would be her eighth nameday all over again.

"You once threw sand in my eyes after calling me a self-important megalomaniac," Akua noted.

"And both of those things were well-deserved," the Intercessor cheerfully replied. "Isn't that what friendship is, darling?"

"Sand in my eyes?" the dark-skinned mage drily asked.

"Shit, you actually have a sense of humour now," the Wandering Bard said, sounding impressed. "Like a functional one, not a 'hahaha down into the tapir pit you go' kind. You're mostly a person these days, it's kind of fucked up you managed that."

"Yes, well," Akua smiled, "have you considered—"

She was still only a thimble of power away from collapsing, but it was all about focus. There was plenty of water in the air and it was child's play to shape some into a nail that she threw right into the Wandering Bard's throat. Only the pest didn't die naturally, gone before the ice even broke skin as Akua fell down to her knees. The wave of nausea had her retching wetly as she leaned a hand against the warm bronze of the reservoir walls. A heartbeat later the Bard was there again, picking up the silver flask she'd dropped fleeing.

"Aw, you made me spill some of the *mignolet*," the ageless monster whined. "Do you know how rare it is for me to get the good stuff?"

Akua forced herself back up to her feet, leaning heavily against the wall as her vision swam. Gods, she was close to falling unconscious. Worse, another spell like that and she was at genuine risk of burning out. Overdrawing on one's magic was a particularly painful way to die even by Praesi standards.

"Yeah, I only came when you'd be in no state to stop me," the Bard easily said.

Akua managed a glare towards the fair-haired woman. This incarnation was tanned and blue-eyed, and shapely in a lowborn way – the kind that came with the frame one had been born with, not proper meals and comfortable living. The Intercessor seemed uncomfortable with the body, though, she noted. The movements were not as smooth as they had been when the two of them last met, with none of the certainty behind the casual laziness in sight.

"Teehee," the Intercessor deadpanned, batting her eyes. "What a coincidence."

"It's been some time since I've last wanted to kill someone this much," Akua admitted.

"Come on now, love," the Bard grinned. "That's not quite true is it? You haven't been standing on all those ledges 'cause you like the view."

Two words in the magetongue and a single runic line, but before the curse of silence could fly out the backlash rang up her arm. First a shiver, then a sensation like every vein was bursting as Akua swallowed a scream. She fell back down to her knees, sweating and trembling. If she'd finished the spell, she thought as her arm pulsed with pain, it would have killed her.

"So," the Intercessor happily said, "we were talking about Cat, yeah?"

"Fuck you," Akua hoarsely said.

Not the finest retort she'd ever managed, but her arm felt like it was bleeding acid from the pores and she once again felt like throwing up.

"My heart," the Intercessor gently said, "if *she* wasn't game to get naked, why would you think you'd meet *my* standards?"

Her fingers clawed at the bronze wall. There was a pause, then a fat chortle.

"That one was a little mean even for me," the Bard admitted. "But hey, you're still pretty terrible so I don't actually feel bad. The important thing, though, is that you're trying to redeem yourself! Kind of."

It was difficult to think through the pain, to focus, but she had been trained in this. She gathered herself, got back on her feet.

"You are here because I threaten you and your designs," Akua said. "The why or how is not particularly important, I imagine."

You are trying to sway me from the path I am on, whatever that might be. You will fail in this."

The fair-haired woman snorted.

"See, this is why I actually do like you," the Bard said. "You're a tragedy, Akua. But the thing is, when you watch a tragic play usually you feel kind of bad for the lead. They're put through some pretty dark shit. But that's the great thing here! You are – and I think I might have mentioned this before but whatever – actually *pretty awful*. So I can watch the tragedy and not feel bad, because you kind of have it coming. It's the best of both worlds for everyone."

A pause.

"Except for you," the Bard helpfully clarified. "You definitely get the worst of both worlds. I thought that went without saying, but sometimes you're a little slow on the uptake so I figured I'd throw it in just to be sure."

"Considering I also have to put up with... whatever this is, my situation truly *is* a tragedy," Akua mildly replied. "Of course, I-"

She lunged forward, but the Bard was already moving. Not quite quickly enough to avoid the sorceress' hands around her throat, she thought, but then she tripped on something – the lute, *the damned lute* – and she was on her knees, swallowing a scream as agony shot up her arm. The Bard patted her shoulder amicably, leaning against the wall. Her lips were wet from the flask she kept pulling at, pulling into a condescending smile.

"This is actually for your own good, sort of," the Intercessor assured her. "See, you've been going down this road since you got out of the cloak and it's coming to a head. And there's a bunch of interesting ways it could end, which aren't unique – you're not that special, darling – but I'll admit that some are pretty rare. Only someone's been paving this road for you, so you're not actually going to the end of the road: you're going to be yanked away just before getting there, 'cause our Cat has a plan for you."

"You are not nearly as interesting as you seem to believe you are," Akua hoarsely said. "Or clever. Do you think I am unaware that *she let me go*? She did it because it does not matter whether I am at her side or on the other side of the Tyrian Sea. I carry my cage with me wherever I go."

"This is the sweet spot," the Bard enthusiastically said. "First you had to lose. Then you questioned your beliefs. Then you pretended you believed what other people do, until you'd been lying long enough you had a hard time telling if you were lying –

that one's a pattern with you, love, you should really work on that."

"You know nothing," Akua hissed.

"Sure, sure," the old monster insincerely said. "Anyways, now you've been freed and cut loose but you're finding you kind of still buy in those things you insist are lies. And it's chewing you up, 'cause you're horrible and for the first time in your life you actually know that. But this is the fun part! Because you're failing at dying – also a pattern in your life, have you ever considered *not* failing at everything of import you've ever tried? – so you're not going to be able to take the easy way out. You're actually going to have to change. Find a path forward you can live with."

Ah, so that was her game.

"Are you to be my personal angel, Bard?" Akua mockingly smiled. "My guide to the embrace of redemption?"

"Call me Yara. And of course not," she solemnly said, face serious as a priest. "I would never *dare* meddle in the story of another Named, I'm a firm believer in the integrity of..."

The Wandering Bard cracked up, laughing until her breath was choked up.

"Oh man," the Intercessor wheezed. "Good times. Yeah, I'm here you actually end up somewhere. Anywhere, really, I'm not super picky about what happens to you on account of not really caring about you as a person. Cat's not interested in you having ending, my sad little friend, which does pisses me off a little. Screwing around with fate like that is *my* shtick, you smarmy one-eyed drunk. Can't you go original for once?"

"Your only interest is in using me to kill her," Akua calmly said.

The Bard grinned nastily.

"Which you don't want," she said in sing-song voice, "cause you're in luuuurv."

The kissy noises that followed were not even the worst part.

"Oh, Catherine, won't you find a stool to stand on and kiss me," the Intercessor continued in a high-pitched voice, then lowered it to a gritty one and closed an eye. "I can't, Akua, even though I've been hinting I want to for years. Staring at your tits is definitely part of a grand master plan, and not just something I enjoy doing."



The Wandering Bard closed her mouth, then turned to meet her eyes and pointed an accusing finger.

"This is you," she contemptuously said. "This is what you sound like."

Akua's jaw clenched.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked.

"Nah, I mostly did that because kicking you in the belly emotionally is kind of fun," the Bard easily admitted. "The thing is, Akua, this superbly accurate rendition of your innermost thoughts I just treated you to is actually kind of nonsense. It's what you like to think is happening, because it's a comfortable idea that you're tortured and in love and it's all very tragic and o Heavens, what could have been if only you weren't just, kind of appalling!"

The old monster thinly smiled, revealing crooked teeth.

"Only what's actually happening is that she's fucked with your head pretty thoroughly because she doesn't believe she can kill the Dead King so she needs someone powerful to step up and contain him," the Intercessor said. "Used to be she was going to lean on Masego to make a seal on the Hellgate that you'd be stuck maintaining forever, but she's gotten a little more ambitious since. She figures she can destroy the undead threat with that little Arsenal project she got Hierophant to cook up and then toss Neshamah himself into the Twilight Ways where you're going to serve as his prison warden forever."

Akua stilled.

"Yeah," the Bard said, smile broadening into a grin. "That's right. She's going to offer you Larat's sloppy seconds of a crown and then drop you in Liesse so you can think about what a bad girl you've been until... well, pretty much the end of time really. She's been priming you to accept that role for *years*, my heart. I've been following the whole thing, not because I need to but because it's like reading a Proceran romance serial where everyone is terrible and pretentious and you don't even get to fuck. It's been *great*, so thanks for that."

Part of Akua felt like being angry, like accusing the Intercessor lying and being indignant. But she'd spent the months since she had left the starry cave on the outskirts of Wolof running away, and now she was simply... tired. It was true, because Catherine loved the sort of cutting irony that the punishment described here would carry and because this had all been coming for a while, hadn't it? Maybe not this specifically, but something like it. A long price for her folly. Nothing she'd done since leaving that camp had mattered, had it?

She'd killed and saved lives, she had fought and bargained and now she was finding that the Tower itself was in her grasp – but she did not want to be here. Not in Ater, not in Praes. Not anywhere, really. Akua knew that the Intercessor had not lied because here and now, on her knees with a broken city around her, going to the Twilight Ways sounded *restful*. It would be a relief, to leave it all and take on a duty that was grim but also for the greater good of Creation. Not something to even the balance against the evil she had done, but something she could take some satisfaction in nonetheless.

Scratching the edges of the itch, but was that not the best she could hope for?

If that offer had come tomorrow, after the Tower all but fell in her grasp and the great lords of this empire all looked up at her with hopes in their eyes like she could save them, save anything at all, then Akua Sahelian knew deep in her bones that she would have accepted it without a second thought. And this terrified her, not because of how deeply Catherine had come to know her – even now that thought was a thrilling anguish – but because the moment had already come to her. Just now. But soon it would fade. Soon the exhaustion would leave her, and with rest the last of this sudden clarity would be gone to never return.

"You didn't come here to convince me," Akua quietly said. "The only reason you're here is to spoil a piece before it all comes together."

"Got it in one," the Wandering Bard smiled. "But since it's the end times, my sweet, I'll offer you one on the house. The truth is, you don't owe shit to Catherine Foundling. What did she lose at the Doom, except for soldiers? It's the foundation of her reign. No, that day gives her no claim on you. It's the people you murdered that you're indebted to, and what the fuck do any of them care about the Black Queen?"

She shrugged.

"You probably don't have much longer left to live," the Bard said. "Maybe none of us do, if Nessie gets his way. So for once in your life, Akua Sahelian, won't you actually make a decision?"

The old monster met her eyes.

"Not do what your mother burned into you," Yara said, "or Praes or Catherine. Something that *you* think worth doing."

Her jaw clenched.

"I will not be your puppet," Akua said.

"That's the beauty of it," the Intercessor smiled, raising her flask in a toast. "I'm the only person in this entire empire of the damned that does not need you on strings."

She drank deep, looking unspeakably satisfied, but Akua knew the look in her eyes. She saw it, sometimes, in her own looking glass.

"How long have you been doing this, Yara?" she quietly asked.

The Intercessor studied her.

"I remember when the first boat touched the beach," the other woman said. "The sound their boots made on the wet rocks, the way my little brother kept tugging at my tunic in excitement. It wasn't called Ashur, would not be for many years. The men were not yet called Aenian."

"What happened?" she whispered.

"The same thing that always happens," Yara of Nowhere said, "when men with swords are greeted by songs and gifts."

"You survived," Akua said.

"Survived," the other woman smiled. "There's a word that means nothing. You can keep breathing and have most of you waiting in a grave, Akua. If you learn anything from me, learn that. There's no worth in just existing. You have to make it count."

"Don't you?" Akua asked.

The Intercessor smiled.

"We'll meet again," she said, "before this is over."

She rapped a knuckle against the bronze wall, a loud ringing sound, and the moment Akua blinked she was gone. Silence lingered in her wake. Eventually, the golden-eyed noble left the reservoir. Below her vultures were waiting, circling. High Lord Jaheem was the one who handed her the letter with the Tower's seal. They'd had one of their own as well, he told her. Summons to a formal court tomorrow. Offers to allow in household troops for security.

"It is an abdication in all but name, Lady Akua," High Lord Jaheem said, tone tight with excitement. "Malicia only seeks to preserve her dignity by being properly defeated before the greats of Praes before she surrenders the throne."

Akua thumb slid across the smooth writing on the parchment, the words that gave a time and a place and a knife. *Malicia chose this*, she thought. *For herself and for me*. And still, looking at

the letter was the first step up the stairs of the Tower, Akua wondered. It was rope she held, she recognized.

But was it a knot or a noose?

## **Interlude: A Girl Without A Name**

*"Fate is a stone made up of your every deed and hung around your neck. If it breaks your back, there is only one soul to blame."*

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty

Sitting on the edge of a rooftop, looking down at the long stairs of stone, the Wandering Bard began to tune her lute. This, she knew, was to be the place.

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Ater was still as a grave.

Vivienne had last seen a city so injured in the wake of First Liesse, as she ghosted through the fallen city avoiding the Fifteenth's goblin hunters, but the tone of the streets was different here. In Liesse the people had been happy in a bittersweet way, for though the rebellion named after their city had died within its walls the people had been spared a dark fate at the hands of a horde of devils. Here there was no joy, the Princess thought. Ater was huddling in its houses, averting its eyes even as the last ashes of the Battle of the Spiders began to cool. But underneath that fear, Vivienne thought, there was anger. Furious, desperate anger.

The High Seats had massacred thousands to contain the spiders, and while there were many who'd argued much worse would have happened if they hadn't the opinion was not popular. Not when everyone had a cousin or a daughter or a husband who'd seen the household troops of the great nobles retreat to their barricades in good order and leave the rest of the city to burn. Reports had come overnight from the Princess' agents that it was Malicia that was being blamed for the spiders themselves, seen as some kind of desperate attempt to destroy the capital's current favourite: Lady Akua Sahelian.

The Empress in the City, they called her.

There had been no riots since the end of the battle, no mob had taken to the streets as the Legions moved to clear out the last of the giant spiders and seal the openings, but the anger and fear hung in the air like poison. The stalemate in eastern Ater behind the horde of orcs that'd seized the city and the noble armies that'd entered it illegally kept the people behind closed

doors, afraid of another battle erupting, but it wouldn't last. Like all leashed monsters, it would shake its way loose eventually. Someone was going to pay for the Battle of the Spiders, but the part worrying Vivienne Dartwick was that she wasn't sure *who*.

"Gods," the Squire muttered. "The city looks empty. Not a stray cat out in the streets."

"Assuming there are any left, after the spiders," Vivienne drily said.

It was not yet dusk, but on the horizon the sun was dipping low. They would make good time, she thought, as their party had yet to even be hailed as it passed through the ash-strewn streets of the city. Not that many would dare make demands of the force the Princess was leading into Ater: only twenty knights of the Order of the Stolen Crown rode with her, but a cohort of legionaries from the once-Thirteenth marched behind them. Wind picked up suddenly in the distance, making strands of some sort of iridescent cloth spin under the sunlight, and half her men reached for their swords. They had come invited, but most her soldiers were Callowan: no one here put much stock in the Tower's word.

Arthur Foundling grimaced at her answer, soft-hearted boy that he still was. Catherine had been adamant that he come with her even though Vivienne would have much preferred Indrani as an escort, but the Princess understood why. The pattern of three between him and the Black Knight was a tool that would be very precisely used so the day could be brought to the right ending.

"The Carrion Lord is a monster," the Squire cursed.

Vivienne cocked an eyebrow.

"Water is wet," she answered.

The young man had the grace to look somewhat embarrassed. He had an expressive face, young Arthur. That was for the best. Vivienne preferred knowing where she stood with him: the heroes that were most controlled, like the Pilgrim and the White Knight, tended to be dangerous and unpredictable. That expressive face flickered through hesitation, then the steel of determination.

"Did she know, Your Grace?" the Squire asked.

Vivienne kept her eyes from glancing at the broken districts they had left behind her. Ravaged by devils and demons and monsters of all stripes. *Did the Black Queen know her teacher was going to do this? Did she allow him to consign thousands of innocents to death for some mad plan?* The Princess met his eyes squarely.

"No."

The dark-haired squire looked guiltily relieved and Vivienne was again reminded of how young he was. Young enough he'd not thought to ask the right question. Would Catherine have intervened, if she knew? Vivienne was not sure, and the thought worried at her. There had been a time where her friend would have executed someone guilty of something like the Battle of the Spiders without a second thought. Cut their head off where they stood. But that'd been before the Everdark, before the war on Keter and the dark choices it had demanded of them all. Catherine sacrificed people more easily than she once had, and it did not eat away at her so much afterwards.

It was something she'd had to learn to keep them all alive, Vivienne reminded herself.

And yet the Princess could not shake the thought. This entire campaign, beginning with the attack on Wolof and then moving through the bruising battle at Kala and now this bloody wrestling match over Ater, it felt... different. It was not being waged like older campaigns. Lives were being sacrificed for Named victories, for schemes that used the very currents of Creation, and there'd been a time where Catherine had balked at such things. If the way she'd been going about it had reminded Vivienne of the Black Knight or Tariq Fleetfoot she would have set the worry aside, but it wasn't either of those men that came to mind sometimes.

Vivienne Dartwick was one of the few people alive to have been in a band of five with the Wandering Bard, and dreaded that sometimes she saw glimpses of one woman in the other.

"Thank the Gods," Arthur Foundling murmured. "That would have been difficult."

An understatement. The boy cheered up soon enough, fears alleviated for now. Lucky him.

"So how did was our invitation secured, anyhow?" the Squire asked. "I'd heard that Dread Empress Malicia wanted the Grand Alliance nowhere near her court."

And there was the counterargument to Vivienne's fears, brought out by the same young man who'd raised them. She slowed the gait of her horse and flicked a glance behind them. Arthur followed her gaze, both of them taking in the massive shape of the great undead spider that loomed over the eastern walls.

"I asked her why she chose to raise Tenebrous," the Princess said. "It seemed wasteful and slow, if she only intended to fight Ranger. But it was never about that fight – she was forcing Malicia's hand."

Arthur looked surprised.

"The Empress is hiding in the Tower," he said. "I doubt a simple undead monster is enough to topple that abomination."

"Malicia herself is out of reach," Vivienne agreed, "but what about everyone else she invited?"

That'd been the unspoken threat. If the Grand Alliance were not invited, it would have to knock. And maybe the empress could ride out that storm, but all the other guests had assets that mattered to them in the city. Would they stay and humour Malicia at court while their armies and kin were being trampled? And so Catherine had raised a city-sized spider so that she could then refrain from using it, still getting exactly what she'd wanted all along. That was the answer to Vivienne's every fear, every worry about her friend and queen growing harsher and more ruthless by the years. She was all those things, yes.

And it worked.

The Princess breathed out, spurring her mount into a trot. It would have to be enough. After the war there would be time to learn kindness again. For all of them, not only Catherine. Until then, she would silence her doubts. And continue to carry into the heart of Praes the two deaths she had been charged to bring, one hidden and one due.

"Let's hurry up," Vivienne Dartwick said, looking up at the looming shape of the Tower to the east. "It begins at dusk, and it would not do to be late."

—

Dusk was coming and with it the end of Alaya's reign.

The Dread Empress of Praes leaned against the balcony, watching night crawl over her capital. There was no wind here, enchantments prevented it, but high above the perennial storm clouds that haunted the Tower's heights were roiling. Five years ago she'd been the law of this land: her enemies had been broken, her influence spread to every nook and cranny of the empire. How quickly it had all gone wrong. Now she struggled to find the decision that had begun it all. Letting Akua Sahelian loose to build her weapon instead of having her decapitated head tossed into the Hall of Screams, maybe. Yet the thought was cowardice, the avoidance of a less pleasant truth.

There was no 'one decision' to point at because she'd been losing her grasp for years.

Alaya was not yet certain it had been a mistake the doomsday weapon. Had it not been broken during the Folly, had she had more

time to lay the foundations abroad... Well, the world would never know. But looking back, it had been foolish of her to go about it the way she had. She should have sat with Wekesa and explained her reasons, asked for his help. She should not have gone behind Amadeus' back to get it built either, for though it was her right as his empress it had also been a betrayal of their partnership. Too many things between them had been left unsaid over the years, the weight of too many private disappointments coming to crush their backs.

"I became comfortable," Dread Empress Malicia quietly told the horizon.

And though the Tower could forgive a hundred thousand sins, never once that. No, she had made mistakes. Others had as well, but those were not hers to answer for so what point was there in listing them for the Gods to hear? Ater would need to be rebuilt, and this time Alaya would see it done right. As a capital of a great empire should be, not the horror it had been. Those who had supported her she would reward, those who had betrayed her she would bury, and beyond that there were... affairs to settle. Mistakes had been made on both sides but from them she would salvage what she could.

Though Amadeus' stroke of madness with the spiders had become a stone around her neck, the city being convinced it was her doing, Alaya held no grudge. Even in the years of their parting, they had never struck direct blows at one another. That hope she cradled still, for all the cold of the night, and though it was not an answer for their years of bitterness it was not nothing either. A foundation, perhaps, for something new. A different understanding of who they were to each other. It would have to be revisited when she reclaimed her throne. *If* she reclaimed her throne.

This game was now long past certainties.

Ime's soft footsteps shook her out of her reverie, though she did not turn to look at her spymistress. The other woman came to stand at her side instead, sharing in companionable silence for a moment before the demands of the evening forced an end.

"It is all in place," Ime said. "They are beginning to arrive."

Far below, Malicia could make out the distant banners of Takisha Muraqib and her many vassals. Like a river of colourful silk they streamed down the avenue, preparing to enter one of the formal gatehouses that would allow entry into the Tower.

"I might well lose, tonight," the empress admitted. "It's been a long time since I was so close to complete defeat, Ime. I cannot help but think it might be one many years in the making."



A moment of silence.

"It has," Ime finally said. "You have been making mistakes, Alaya. Embracing schemes more convoluted than they need to be, using the same tactics that put you in a corner to try to get out of it. It got worse after Amadeus left, but the tendency was there even before."

The spymistress grimaced.

"But you kept winning anyway, so who were we to argue?" she said. "Only the victories became narrower, costlier. And now here we are, at a crossroads where there is so little difference between victory and defeat they might as well be the same thing."

The words stung, but Alaya did not flinch away from them. She was not in a position to close her eyes.

"There will need to be changes," Malicia quietly admitted.

Ime nodded.

"It will not be the same, after tonight," she said. "But I would not have you forget, Alaya of Satus, that you ruled ably for forty years. Longer than any tyrant before you, perhaps longer than any tyrant ever will. Your reign waned, as all crowns do, but that does not lessen the achievement."

"I'd thought to have eternity, once," Malicia smiled. "Forty years seems all too few."

"It has been a worthy reign," Ime softly replied. "And I am proud of the part I have played in it."

Alaya's eyes moved to woman at her side. It had been many years since the two of them had shared a bed, and even when they had there'd been nothing more than attraction behind it. That weighed as much as dust in the wind. But the years themselves, Ime standing at her side, those mattered. More than she had ever spoken out loud, and perhaps that should end. When would she speak the words, if not now?

"You are the one who stayed," Alaya said. "I will not forget that, Ime. It..."

She hesitated, tongue stumbling over the words.

"I am grateful," Alaya said. "That you are with me. That you have been for all these years."

Ime smiled, her face worn with age but her eyes still so bright as they had been in their youth.

"I don't regret it," she said. "Even should we lose, I will not regret it."

**Connect** bloomed to life as the Dread Empress smiled back at her spymistress, a reassuring pressure against her soul. It was not a lie. Ime would not turn on her, not even now – the loyalty she felt had not lessened. Both of them looked down below, beholding the City of Gates.

"I must go," Ime finally said. "I'll see you on the other side, Your Dread Majesty."

"Gods willing," Malicia smiled.

And if not? Hang them all. Ime disappeared into the Tower, the sound of her footsteps fading away, and Dread Empress Malicia was left to her thoughts.

Somewhere below her the girl come to take her throne was taking her first steps up the Tower.

—

Akua Sahelian looked up at the dark clouds above, breathing in the evening air.

The stairs beneath her feet were smooth stone, carved into the likeness of twisted and weeping souls. Every step she took was on their backs. The Sentinels stood on the sides in eerily still rows, garbed in wrought steel as their eyes followed her from beneath the black iron masks covering their faces. Akua had been in the Tower before many a time, but this was the first time she had ever been invited to take the Tyrant's Gate. The dark-skinned sorcerers breathed out and resumed her climb, Kendi trailing behind her like a shadow. He would not be allowed in at her side, but he would accompany her every step of the way until then. It was reassuring weight to have at her back, his hatred. Like a knife at her throat. There was not a sound to be heard save for their boots against the stone, and under unblinking stares they reached the summit.

Before them stood before an intricate puzzle of obsidian, shifting pieces of it inscribed with runes. The gate was tall as three men and half as wide, thrumming with ancient power. The brother of a woman she'd led to her death at the Folly stood by her, eyes hooded.

"It means nothing," Kendi quietly said. "That is the secret of this place. It is an altar to Below, and you may think yourself the mistress but all you can ever be is the sacrifice."

He leaned closer.

"Climb and bleed, Akua Sahelian," he whispered into her ear.

She did not turn to watch him leave, disappear into the deepening shadows. She would meet him again tonight, but the crossing would be hers alone.

"I come summoned by the Tyrant," Akua Sahelian called out, voice calm. "Gatekeeper, grant me entrance."

The obsidian pieces shivered, twisting and turning as if it were living flesh. A terrible face emerged, its great and burning eyes the ancient runes for order, and the ancient demon that Dread Emperor Sinister himself had bound to the gate began to laugh. The sound was like rust swallowing a precious thing, the death rattle of a hundred babes.

"You," the demon said, "are of the master's blood."

"True to it, my mother liked to say," Akua replied.

The old abomination laughed again. Every instance was a fresh horror.

"I grant you entrance, Akua Sahelian," the demon said.

She shivered. The face shattered, breaking apart in tiles of obsidian, and locks unseen began to open one after another. The gate slowly opened, revealing a floor of dark marble leading into an antechamber. Akua stepped through the threshold, eyes growing accustomed to the gloom, and as the gate closed behind her she found a lone Sentinel waiting for her. They stood at the edge of the high-ceilinged room beyond the antechamber, not far from mosaics enchanted with curses so hateful that she could almost taste the emotion in the air. Akua approached, cocking an eyebrow at the soldier.

"A lone soul to guide me up the Tower," she said. "My own personal psychopomp, is it?"

She offered the Sentinel a smile.

"Elegant to the end, Malicia," she said. "Shall we?"

The Sentinel nodded. Oh? Unusually expressive of it. They led the way through the large room and up the spiralling stairs, not that Akua found it hard to keep up. She ran her finger against the scaled railings, the sculpted serpents shivering at her touch. The sorcery in the stone was older than Procer, but it purred maliciously at her touch.

"So how did you end up chosen for this, anyway?" Akua idly asked. "Picked the short straw?"

An amusing thought, a pack of eerily Silent sentinels staring at each other through the iron masks while drawing from another's hands.

"I volunteered."

The golden-eyed sorcerers almost missed a step. A man's voice, that. She could make out as much even through the mask. And a very unusual Sentinel indeed.

"Alas, if you intended to seduce me then I must warn you that my heart has already been taken," she easily said. "It should be somewhere north of Vale, assuming a wight didn't eat it."

The Sentinel did not betray amusement, thought it was hard to tell through that armour.

"I will have to live with the disappointment," the Sentinel replied.

Akua's fingers clenched. No, that wasn't a Sentinel at all. The same sorceries that made them so unflinchingly loyal to whoever held the Tower did not allow for anything as delicate as a sense of humour to remain. Her steps stuttered, stopped. She laid a hand on the railing.

"Who are you?" she coldly asked.

His hand went up, reaching for the top of the helmet. There was a little click, then another, and with the deft fingers the man took off the iron mask. Below were pale green eyes she had seen before, though the face around them had aged since she last saw them.

"Akua Sahelian," the Carrion Lord said. "We are overdue a conversation."

A flash of rage seized her by the throat, clenched her muscles.

"We have more than that overdue," she snarled.

Sorcery came to her harsh and eager. The fireball she tossed at his face was cut through – a single smooth movement from draw to strike – but she'd known it would be. It had bought her the moment she needed to sink her hooks into the railing through her hand, part of the stone smoothly coiling around arm as a fanged head emerged behind the Carrion Lord and struck. He parried it somehow, reflexes inhuman even without a Name, but it was a sword against stone. The steel broke, and when he avoided the snakes' second attack the Duni found that the wall behind him had turned into a nest of snakes. The Tower sought her commands hungrily, like a hound starved of affection.

The snakes in the wall caught the Carrion Lord's limbs, and as he struggled to rip himself free Akua coldly smiled.

"Rip," she ordered in Mthethwa.

The snake come from the railing hit the side of the armoured man like a scorpion bolt, fangs sinking in and wrenching out an entire armour plate as well as chunk of the aketon beneath. The Carrion Lord's jaw clenched in pain but that was only a start. Releasing the railing, Akua strode half a step and sunk her knife deep under his ribs. In the stomach. The man gasped and she felt a spurt of satisfaction.

"I could have aimed for the heart or the lungs," Akua told him, tone even, "but you don't get to die that quickly."

She twisted the knife cruelly before ripping it out, enjoying the way his face drew tight.

"Did you think I'd forgotten my father's death?" she harshly said. "The goblins might have pulled the triggers, but the kill was yours from beginning to end."

Feeling like she wanted to rip out his throat with her own teeth, she stabbed him in the stomach again and ripped it free in a spray of blood.

"You are no longer under Catherine's protection, you old fool," she hissed. "And I am no longer at her side. Did you really think that without her in the way there was anything stopping me from killing you?"

To her utter fury, the man hacked out a wet laugh.

"No," the Carrion Lord said, lips flecked with red. "But I knew you'd go for the slow death."

"And what does that give you?" she mocked.

"Until I bleed out," the green-eyed man replied, "to convince you to heal me."

Akua blinked at him, silenced by surprise and utter disbelief.

"Mother always said," she finally replied, "that you were just as mad as your predecessors. Just better at hiding it."

The Carrion Lord slumped down against the wall, armoured boot slipping against the stone with an ungainly sound. He was, she noted, positioning himself so he would bleed out more slowly. A methodical lunatic to the end.

"This is the Tower," the Carrion Lord said. "Where are the mad to go, if not here?"

He looked amused. Akua sliced him across the face for it, deep through the nose and both cheekbones.

"I've always used torturers instead of my own hands," the golden-eyed mage said. "But for you, Amadeus of the Green Stretch, I will make an exception."

And maybe his screams would drown out the sound the bolts had made when the volley had pierced through Papa's flesh. A thump, she thought. Almost like biting into an apple. She cut him again, stabbing deep into his cheek until she felt bone.

"I imagine you'll get practice enough," the Carrion Lord rasped, "as Dread Empress."

She laughed in his face.

"Is that what this is all for?" Akua said. "You cower at the prospect of my taking the Tower?"

What a stupid way to die, she thought. He chuckled wetly, tongue flicking across his lips but only spreading the red.

"So which was it the Bard pushed you towards?" he asked.

Her eyes narrowed.

"She wants me to take the throne," Akua said after hesitating a moment. "I think. But as a Dread Empress Benevolent the Second."

Dread Emperor Benevolent, the first and only hero to have ever reigned over Praes. At war with over half the realm from the moment of his coronation to the last gasp of his very grim end. There were few tyrants who could boast of having beaten Dread Empress Massacre at her namesake, and Benevolent was hallowed even among those. He'd come terrifyingly close enough to *winning* that he had been purged from every known record, demons of Absence being put to work to tie up loose ends. Only private libraries like those of the Vault still had mentions of him.

"Always a game behind the game with her," the Carrion Lord said. "We haven't seen the end of it."

"You have," Akua smiled.

His face had grown even paler. The internal bleeding must have been excruciatingly painful, she thought with satisfaction. May at least one of the screams he was swallowing make it to the feet of the Gods Below, so that they might pass it on to Dumisai of Aksum as his daughter's funerary gift.

"Maybe," he shrugged, hacking a cough after. "But that matters little. I am an instrument. If purpose is served, the outcome is acceptable. It's you that concerns me now."

"Oh?" Akua smiled. "How novel. Won't you Speak to me, Carrion Lord? Ask me to knife my hand again. See what happens."

She stuck him in the stomach again, just because she could. He gasped in pain.

"Have you decided I am not fit for the Tower?" she mocked.

He laughed.

"Worse," the man said. "I put the nobles of the Wasteland to the test, Sahelian. Only one passed."

Even though the implication was obvious, the sheer absurdity of what he'd said meant it took her a beat to realize. It was unthinkable. His hatred of the nobility was a keystone of his reputation, his legend. It would have been like Catherine staying sober for a month, or Vivienne Dartwick not being a disappointment in every single way she could be. Still, the sentence had her lips quirking into an unpleasant smile.

"My, but that must sting," Akua purred. "Though if this was meant to silence me, I must say-"

"Do you want to rule Praes?" the Carrion Lord bluntly cut in.

She blinked. Hesitated.

"What is your game, Duni?" Akua finally asked.

"You could," he said. "Maybe even well. I don't like it, wouldn't like what you would do with it. But you could."

"Are you offering me your support?" she asked, voice thick with disbelief.

At least the blood loss was making him entertaining. Akua did hate a humorless bleeder.

"You remind me of Alaya," the Carrion Lord noted. "When we were young. The best of her, and some of the worst. And there are rules. So you could claim it."

"And what would that have to do with you?" Akua scorned.

"Is it worth keeping?"

She paused, studied him through narrowed eyes.

"You are trying to talk me out of taking the throne," Akua said.

It was the best reason she'd heard to climb the Tower so far.

"Heh," the man said. "No. I want more than that. But this first. You've been out of the cage, now. Seen the world. The Dread Empire of Praes, the way it is, is it worth keeping?"

Akua's lips tightened. If it were, would she be so horrified at the thought of being forced to rule it?

"What do you want from me, Carrion Lord?"

"Nothing," the man laughed, his green eyes bloodshot. "I already know your answer. Wouldn't have passed otherwise. You see it now, don't you? *The sickness.*"

"And you think yourself the man to excise it?" she laughed. "Oh, the cold man with the hard hand here to teach us his better ways. Praes is not a young widow looking for excitement, Carrion Lord. There is no appetite for Dread Emperor Amadeus."

"It's not about me," the dying man said. "Or you. Look around, Sahelian. *Why is this still standing?*"

"There is nothing else," Akua said.

"Maledicta the Second," he said. "After her assassination-"

"Haider's Reign," she frowned.

"The Throneless Years," he retorted.

Both referred to the same two decades after Maledicta II's death, though his term was the one used by the Tower's formal chroniclers.

"You want to change Callow for Keter," she realized.

She was reluctantly impressed by the boldness.

"No," he coughed. "Not just that. It ended with Vindictive the First. It shouldn't have."

Akua breathed in sharply.

"That would not be an empire," she said.

The man offered a sharp, bloody smile that split his face in two.

"No," he agreed. "It wouldn't be."

"You talk in circles," Akua said. "What is it you *want*, Carrion Lord?"

He moved and she almost slashed him against, but he didn't even have his sword in hand. It was further down the steps. Instead he was pawing at his belt with armoured fingers, and what he



presented her he was holding between his thumb and his forefinger. Akua stilled.

"Take it," he said.

"This is a trap," she replied.

"The trap is in not giving it to you," he rasped. "I see that now."

He coughed out a laugh, red trailing his face, but his eyes were clear.

"I always thought it'd be me," Amadeus of the Green Stretch confessed. "That it was what I was for. But that was arrogance, Alaya was right. I never loved this place enough to have the right. It has to be you."

"You despise me," Akua said.

"Yes," he smiled. "But it has to be you. Because you passed. Because it's in your blood. The original murder, Sahelian, isn't that your family's favourite boast? You began it all."

She snatched it out of his fingers, as if expecting to be bit, but there was nothing. No trap, no trick.

"And that's all it takes?" Akua asked.

"A choice," the Carrion Lord rasped. "What more could you need? It's the only true gift the Gods gave us."

"You don't know which one I'll make," she said.

He grinned, blood-streaked and nasty to the bone.

"*Mile thaman Sahelian*," the Carrion Lord mocked.

Her fingers clenched.

"Were you not going to convince me to heal you?" she sweetly asked.

He shrugged.

"Win some," he began, "lose-"

She stuck the knife back in his belly.

"There," Akua hissed. "You'll bleed out slower, and that's the only mercy you'll ever have of me."

Let him die here at the bottom of the Tower, forever reaching beyond his grasp. She kicked him away and he fell down a few stairs. She breathed out, looked down at the small thing still in

the palm of her hand. She closed the fingers, breathed out and settled herself. She rose, to the distant sound of a dying man whistling the tune to an old song.

It was, Akua realized as her blood ran cold, *The Tyranny of the Sun*.

—

Breaking into the Tower had been *shockingly* easy.

Archer had felt a little cheated, even though it stood that things should be pretty much stacked in their favour. The three of them had Scribe guiding them for one – well, arguably this was about them escorting Scribe but eh – and the great difficulty in accessing the Tower from underground was gone. The giant spiders lurking in the tunnels were, you know, already topside in dead. Which meant the tunnels were moist and stinky but not actually all that dangerous and they'd made it to what Scribe claimed to be the lowest levels of the Tower, the 'underpinnings', without much trouble.

"The haven't been many guards," Cocky said.

Which was all well and good to say, when she hadn't been doing any of the killing. That'd been Indrani and Alexis, yeah, as usual doing the grunt work.

"The Tower is as a city within the city," Scribe replied. "Most parts of it are like small villages that rule themselves with only occasional intervention from the tyrant. I've had us skimming the edge of where the latrine men live. They post few guards, and the Sentinels are spread too thin to plug the gaps as they usually would."

"I'm not complaining," Alexis grunted. "Hopefully it'll be just as easy getting to this Ime."

"We've been lucky," Scribe said. "She'd be much harder to get at if she hadn't gone to the underpinnings."

It was nice of the Huntress not to be the kind of heroine who asked too many questions when Catherine sent you to capture, interrogate and execute the leader of the Eyes of the Empire but unfortunate since Indrani *did* actually have questions about that. Now she was going to have to ask them herself, like an asshole.

"Do we know why she's down here?" Archer asked.

The corridor ahead of them was empty, as the last two had been. They were large, windy and winding things that snaked towards a distant centre. The grounds above which there was an actual giant tower, presumably. The Tower was kind of like a tree, the 'roots'

that were the underpinnings actually spreading out much further than the structure stood.

"There has been activity from the Eyes down here over the last two days," Scribe said. "Presumably Malicia is preparing something for her guests upstairs."

Which was presumably one of the reasons their buddy Ime was going to be interrogated before the execution. Might be useful to know what Malicia was up to except for going crazy and pissing everyone off. They switched corridors twice before finally running into people, which happened to be a pair unarmed messengers. Alexis was a softie so she knocked hers out, but Indrani wasn't in the business of letting liabilities get up. Hers wouldn't. They were close to the centre, Scribe told them, and it checked out: moments later they ran into the first checkpoint manned by Sentinels. Only ten of the, though, so before long the four of them were wiping their blades. and moving on.

Another two checkpoints with Sentinels, but after that it was only Eyes manning the gates and they honestly weren't much to write home about. Like, even Cocky could handle them up close and in Indrani's humble opinions there were some trouts in the Hwaerte that would give the Concocter trouble in hand-to-hand.

"It's unusual," Scribe noted. "It should be Sentinels handling this, not Eyes. Ime is trying to keep something quiet."

"Quiet from who?" Indrani frowned. "The Sentinels answer only to the Empress, right? They're supposed to be all brainwashed to be loyal."

"Exactly," Scribe replied, sounding fascinated. "So what is it that she's trying to hide from Malicia? And more importantly *for who?*"

There wasn't time to stop and interrogate a prisoner even if they took one, since if they stopped pushing in there was a decent chance someone would find one of the older corpses and send a warning ahead, so they pressed on urgently. It went pretty smoothly until they hit a real blockade with crossbowmen and a few legionaries – unmarked, so they were likely Eyes too – that made it a proper fight. Alexis took a cut on her face and Indrani had to ask for a healing salve for her hand after she made a mage eat his own fireball. Hilarious, but she wasn't made of fingers. Unlike that fucking toucan yesterday, there was an image that'd stay with her for a while.

Behind the blockade Scribe had told them there was one of the main water tunnels for the Tower, but the large room they entered past the corpses had a lot more than water in it. It also had what was at least a thousand magically sealed barrels, not a

single of which was stacked over an other. There were even little palisades between sections: whoever had put these there had been real careful about it. That smelled of danger to Indrani, but she didn't get to spend much time thinking on it because there was also an old woman inside the room and Scribe was looking all pleased.

"Just a guess," Indrani called out, "but would you happen to be Ime?"

The old lady was Soninke and pretty clearly getting long in the tooth, but she was keeping it tight. Probably highborn, they tended to age better than most out in the Wasteland. The older woman glanced at her and then sighed.

"And I take it you three are the Ranger's pupils," she said before her eyes moved to the fourth among them. "Scribe, I see you've stopped clutching the Black Queen's skirts long enough to make act of presence. We're all very grateful, I'm sure."

"I might clutch them," Scribe mildly replied, "but at least, unlike some, I can claim never to have been *under* my patroness' skirts."

"Savage," Indrani appreciatively said.

On the other hand, while Malicia was terrible and kind of evil but she was also ridiculously good looking so, you know, respect.

"I suppose it is harder to get into pants," Ime smiled pleasantly. "Though certainly not for lack of trying."

Indrani shared a look with Cocky, who was also smothering a grin. It wasn't often they got to hear the old guard air their dirty laundry, this was to be savoured. Only, Gods forgive her, Archer was actually kind of in charge here and they had a mission to get done. Once they nabbed Ime and got her singing, they'd finally have an idea of what the Hells was going on here on top of neatly ensuring Malicia wasn't going to see Vivienne coming. There was a reason they'd brought Scribe here: once the current mistress of the Eyes in Praes had gone to join her agents Below, the old one could step back into the role.

And it some of the officers hesitated, well, that was why they'd brought knives.

"It genuinely breaks my heart to stop this," Indrani told them, "but we're going to have to wrap this up. Ime, congratulations, you have been taken prisoner. Please don't resist, we're trying to wean Alexis off kicking people and it only encourages her."

"She's lying," Alexis flatly said. "They're not actually trying."

"Charming," Ime drily replied.

Scribe suddenly hummed, stepping back from a barrel.

"These are goblin-made," she said. "Straight from the Eyries. What is it you're doing down here, Ime?"

"You don't know," the old woman mused. "Interesting. So why are *you* here, if not to interrupt me?"

"It doesn't matter," Scribe said. "It's finished."

There was a long moment of silence as the two women stared each other down. Indrani awkwardly cleared her throat to get their attention and was entirely ignored.

"You're here for me," Ime quietly said, "because you're trying to blind us. You smuggled something into the Tower you're afraid I'll catch."

"You're losing your touch," Scribe smiled.

"That's enough of that," Archer sharply said, baring her blades. "We're done here. Scribe, shut your mouth and Ime-"

"Assassin," Ime hissed out. "You brought Assassin in here. You're trying to kill Malicia."

Fuck, that wasn't great. She put a spring to her step even as Ime began to move away, past rows of barrel and close to the large water-filled tunnel flowing behind them.

"I'm sorry about this," Indrani said, halfway meaning it.

"I'm not," Ime said, then glanced at Scribe. "Do you think you're the only one who can bargain with devils?"

Oh boy, that did not sound – Archer ducked, the arrow brushing through her air. On a balcony above, the Ranger nocked a second arrow before leaping down. She landed at Ime's side, looking amused.

"Devils, are we?" the Lady asked. "Ime, you're getting rude in your old age."

"Well, we can't all be born ageless bitches," the spymistress flatly replied.

Cocky swallowed a laugh behind her.

"I'm calling in my marker from helping Grem get his letters out," Ime continued. "I need to get out of here."

"I needed to be here for the barrels anyway," Ranger shrugged.  
"Go ahead."

"That's not happening," Indrani flatly said.

Behind her, Alexis nocked an arrow. Tension rose.

"Hey Scribe," Ime called out.

The villainess in question stared at the other spymistress.

"Yes?" she reluctantly.

Ime glanced at Ranger, then at the three of them.

"Mine's bigger," she said, and broke into a run.

It went downhill from there.

—

The twenty-fourth level of the Tower was large enough a scream would echo, the Warlord thought.

It was a striking place, as befitting of the hall that hosted the imperial court. Black marble walls rose tall, touched by plume of colours: makeshift pillars of cloth hanging from the ceiling in red, green and gold. The floor beneath their feet was a great mosaic depicting the history of Praes. It went as far back as Subira Sahelian murdering the founder Dread Empress Maleficent in order to become Dread Emperor Sinister and stretched out to events as recent as Wekesa the Warlock immolating Thalassina – the only event of Malicia's reign depicted at all. Everywhere jewels were set in walls and furniture while gold veins dripped down stone as gilded ornaments.

The two orcs at his side, Oghuz the Lamé and Hegvor Allspeak, looked intimidated by the luxury. There were benches here set with enough rubies to feed either of their clans for a year. And some of the nobles wore on them more wealth than any of them would spend in a lifetime: enchanted cloths that looked like shadows, rings made entirely of rubies and even a woman in full dragonscale armour.

"There is nothing to be impressed of," Hakram spoke in Kharsum.  
"What is there here that was not built on our backs?"

"Ha," Chief Hegvor snorted. "Well said."

"Should have taken the court instead of the camps, Deadhand," Oghuz grinned, baring fangs at noble who'd come a little too close. "More loot here and fewer swords to defend it."

Few of the nobles had dared approach to talk since they had come, and none since a young lady vassal to Okoro had tried to needle Oghuz and gotten an eye ripped out for it. High Lady Abreha had visited before, courteous for all that she might well be their foe now, but High Lady Wither was keeping to another part of the hall. They'd traded nods but nothing else. Nothing more was needed, in Hakram's opinion. They were allies, not comrades.

"When is Malicia meant to come out, anyway?" Hegvor asked.

"When everyone's here," the Warlord grunted. "She's taking her time, reminding everyone she's important."

"Can't be many people left," Oghuz opined. "The Callowan princess was invited into the back just now, and she was one of the last to arrive."

Vivienne had not stopped to talk, but Hakram hadn't expected her to. She... would not take the choice he had made up north well, he knew. Perhaps worse than Catherine would, though that might be wishful thinking on his part. Either way he'd known that she'd avoid him beyond the necessary until there was opportunity for them to speak in private. She preferred to vent her anger away from prying eyes.

"Company," Hegvor said.

The Warlord followed her gaze, finding an old companion at the end of it. Akua Sahelian was dressed simply, for a noble, but that was a statement of power too: she needed nothing more than dress in white and gold to draw the eye. It was easy to forget how powerful a mage she'd been, but now it was impossible to ignore: even from across the room, her power filled the air. Behind her trailed a dark-skinned man with a short beard and golden earrings. Mage too, by the robes. Mfuasa? Might be someone High Lord Sargon had sent to spy on her. The hall did not quiet when Akua came to stand before him, but eyes followed. They were of interest. They were watched.

"Warlord."

Hakram considered her. The face was a mask, as it always was, but below that he smelled... unease. Something was unsettling her, and for once it was not him. What kind of trouble had she found, that she might then find him preferable to it?

"And what am I to call you, Akua Sahelian?" he asked.

The mfuasa at her side smiled.

"The name is enough," the golden-eyed noble said. "It has been some time, Deadhand. We stand on grounds much changed."

"The trick is to change with them," he gravelled.

He stepped forward, she to the side. It was almost as if they were to begin a walk together, an illusion of companionship.

"Have you?" she asked.

Hakram studied her a moment. She seemed *sincere*. Not it was his turn to be unsettled.

"More than I thought I would," he admitted.

A pause.

"You?"

"I," Akua Sahelian, "am trying to decide."

"That was always your trouble, Sahelian," Hakram gravelled. "Too much red where the thinking should be. Too much thinking where the red should be."

She grimaced.

"I've suffered many a skewering this week," she said, "but not one of you has had the decency to at least stab me as well to distract from the ignominy."

His gaze sharpened.

"Visitors?"

"An old friend," Akua easily said. "The one who talks too much. And another since, whom I left bleeding to death in the stairs."

Hakram clicked his tongue.

"You know better," he said. "Unless you take the head..."

She smiled.

"Then I will get to kill him twice," the sorceress said. "Hardly an imposition."

The Warlord was more impressed that the Carrion Lord has survived a run-in with that one after killing her father than worried about his accomplice's survival. Like as not, he'd planned for it. The man was the kind of clever that thought receiving stab wounds was an acceptable step in a plan, which was by far the stupidest kind of clever.

"And what did our old friend want?" he asked.

A long silence.



"I am less sure," Akua admitted, "the more I think of it."

That was the curse of facing the Intercessor, wasn't it? Your reaction to her prodding might well be part of her plan in the first place. It was like facing an oracle out to get you.

"That tends to be the way with her," the Warlord conceded.

She glanced at him, seemingly amused.

"And if I ventured to ask you for advice, Hakram Deadhand?" Akua said.

He considered that a moment and chose honesty.

"I don't like you," the Warlord said.

"It's actually rather refreshing," she admitted, "for someone to say to my face."

"I don't like you," Hakram repeated, "but I did respect you, once."

"No longer?" she asked, sounding more curious than offended.

"When you were the Diabolist, you were terrible," he said. "But you were truer to yourself than most people ever are. That, if not the deeds of your hands, was worthy of respect."

She chuckled.

"You've always had a knack for surprising me," Akua said.

He snorted, dismissive. She'd just never learned what to expect from him.

"She only has the power we give her," the Warlord said. "That's her trick. Be who you are, Sahelian. Right or wrong, at least it will be true."

Her face closed, eyes looking away. The silence stretched out.

"I never liked you either," Akua confessed. "It was the loyalty as much as the lack of ambition. There was never a lever to pull with you, so I could never be comfortable."

"And yet here we are," the Warlord said.

"Here we are," Akua Sahelian softly agreed.

She breathed out shallowly.

"Do you know what the difference is," she asked, "between a knot and a noose?"

He laughed, to her visible surprise – which in turn surprised him. He'd thought she was making a reference.

"It's the setup of an old joke in Kharsum," Hakram told her. "Because the words are the same, only with a suffix added."

She cocked an eyebrow.

"So what *is* the difference?" she asked.

"They're the same thing," the Warlord told her, "until there's a corpse."

Her face was a blank mask, for a moment, until to his utter surprise and that of most the hall she burst out laughing. Long, throaty and loud. She laughed and laughed, until she trailed off into giggled as she held her ribs loosely.

"Until there's a corpse," she repeated, grinning and shaking her head.

Unsure what had set her off, he settled for eyeing her warily instead.

"I thank you for the advice, Hakram Deadhand," Akua said.

"Found what you were looking for?"

She flexed her palm, smiling.

"Close enough. Fare well, Hakram."

Het met her eyes. Moments passed.

"And you, Akua," he replied.

She left, still shaking her head and smiling. Her attendant, who she'd never introduced, waved a cheeky goodbye. The Warlord flexed his dead hand, wondering if he'd just made a mistake. Whatever the truth of it, though, it was now too late. Events were in motion, even those that had nothing to do with the sorceress. From the corner of his eye he saw that a warrior with a painted shield had come from below to speak to the chief of the Split Tree Clan in a low tone before being dismissed. The Warlord glanced at his adviser, who came closer. Hegvor leaned his way so she could whisper into his ear with her lips hidden from sight.

"We have word," she said. "We've taken everything we need out."

Hakram nodded, satisfied. On schedule.

"And our way out?"

"Waiting for the signal," she said.

Good. Everything was in place, then.

There was nothing left but seeing how the dice fell.

—

Arthur wasn't sure what in the Heavens he was doing here. A trophy hero, maybe? No, that thought was unkind to the Princess and she'd done nothing to deserve that. The Woe had their reputation, but he'd never seen Princess Vivienne be anything but roughly decent. Even Grandmaster Talbot spoke well of her, and when wariness was in order it was not tinted with the kind of fear that the Black Queen commanded. No, the Princess earned rue instead. Arthur would not be surprised if the barracks tale of the Thief having stolen every pair of shoe Brandon Talbot owned after he misspoke in court were actually true.

"I'd expected Queen Catherine to attend personally," Dread Empress Malicia said. "One must wonder what preceding claim there might be on her time."

The Squire had heard the empress was the most beautiful woman in the world and he supposed she was graceful enough, but it was a kind of put-together that put him ill at ease. Like a man too handsome and well-groomed, it hinted at artifice or vanity. Princess Vivienne had taken it in stride, though, and looked calm as a pond on a windless day.

"She likes to delegate minor affairs to me," the Princess mildly said. "I'm sure you won't take offence."

It wasn't a question. While those two continued to spar, Arthur let his eyes and attention wander. There were few people in the antechamber where they had been invited by the servants and fewer still who talked. The Princess had been allowed two guard compared to the twenty Sentinels in here, and to match Arthur himself an old foe had been summoned. The Black Knight loomed so tall he had to wonder how she'd even been able to enter the room, her heavy plate dark as pitch and polished like a mirror. The warhammer whose head rested on the ground was almost as tall as a man, and Arthur knew from experience that to take a blow from it without Name strength was to lose whatever limb was struck. She'd plowed through a line of legionaries like they were kindling back in Wolof, never even noticing that they fought back.

While their rulers talked, the two of them stood to the side like ornaments. He'd felt the Black Knight's gaze on him several times and returned the favour when it moved away. He could not help it. *Why is it that Nim Mardottir is your enemy, Squire?* The Carrion Lord's words were like a fly nipping at his neck. The man had been playing a game, pretending they were not at war and the Black Knight not Malicia's greatest servant, and yet the hesitation remained. Because Arthur had never really questioned

that he was going to kill the Black Knight before this all ended, and that admission shook him. It'd just been a given. He was the Squire and she the Black Knight.

What other way could it end?

Only now, without violence between them, he was standing next to her and noticing things. That she seemed as bored with the talk as he, that she liked to drum her fingers against the grip of her warhammer. Small, meaningless things. But it made her less a force of nature, of Evil, and more a woman in black armour. Maybe she was both, Arthur thought. Maybe that made it even worse, that she'd had a choice and still made this one, but the words felt weak. The resolve behind them was fragile and Arthur Foundling had not become a squire so that he would grow into the kind of knight that swung a sword weighed down with doubt.

So he asked.

"Were you in the streets, when the spiders came?"

His voice was quiet, so that the two rulers by them would not be drawn into it, but the Black Knight heard him. Her armoured head moved to study him in silence. After a moment, she nodded.

"I looked for you," the Squire admitted.

"I know," the Black Knight replied. "Our pattern is not yet finished."

So she knew, he thought with surprise. He wondered what it must be like, knowing that the very currents of fate had worn into Creation the promise of your death. Looking to the horizon and seeing only darkness ahead. It must feel, Arthur Foundling thought, a little like being alone on a shore and knowing nothing you could do would change anything. That the man you loved would still be dead even if you swung your sword until the Last Dusk. It must have had the bitter taste of futility to it.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," the Squire said and found he meant it. "That it could be... fair."

"Fair is not what we bargained for, Squire," the Black Knight said. "We took on the mantle knowing there would be days when we taste blood, when ashes sift through our fingers. My people say that on the day we are born, our death is born as well. We run towards it, it runs towards us, and the most we can take from life is to steal a march on it before we meet."

She sounded calm. Serene, almost, and Arthur felt a surge of disgust clog his throat. Not for her but for him. Nim Mardottir was the one with the sword hanging above her head, and yet he was the one babbling like a sentimental child. It was shameful.

"I'd thought you would hate me," Arthur quietly said. "I almost wish you would."

The Black Knight chuckled.

"Black and white," she said. "That's always been the game. Hate it or laud it, nothing changes. So why burden yourself with the hate?"

He swallowed drily. There was an answer in him, but he did not know how to voice it. Could not, and suddenly he realized there was a silence in the hall. For a moment he feared that their talk had interrupted that of their rulers, but when he looked it was not there that their attention laid. Someone had come up stairs in the back of the antechamber and was forcing their way through the Sentinels. It was an old woman, dark-skinned. Princess Vivienne went still.

"Assassin," the old woman called out. "Assassin is here, Malicia. He's coming for-"

One of the Sentinels behind the empress moved jerkily, blade coming out as the Callowan guards shouted in alarm and reached for their swords. Only the killer was too fast, too smooth, and even as Malicia's eyes widened and she began to turn the point of the steel touched her back – only for a great hammer to smash through it, shattering the blade.

"Behind me, Your Dread Majesty," the Black Knight said, moving the shaken empress.

The Assassin, still faceless and garbed as a Sentinel, immediately began attacking again.

"*Treachery*," the Princess called out as she drew her own sword. "They're attacking us. Squire, face the Black Knight."

Heart in his throat, Arthur drew his sword. Was this it, then? Their ending. The orphan was not a fucking fool. He'd been sent here so that he could kill the Black Knight and clear the way for the assassin his own queen must have sent.

"Why?" he heard the empress ask her champion. "You-"

"I cannot tolerate the way of the world," the Black Knight answered, sounding as if she was smiling. "So I must change it. I will not compromise who I am."

It was like a punch in the gut. *Why is it that Nim Mardottir is your enemy, Squire?* Gods, was that who he was? The kind of knight he was going to be?

"No," Arthur Foundling answered, biting down on his indignation. "No."

He moved, Name pulsing, and struck. The blade ripped through the Assassin's hand as he jerked in surprise. The killer drew back to flee, Sentinels converging on them all as the Princess watched them all with cold eyes. But it was the Black Knight's gaze he met, finding the silent question it held.

"Not black and white," the Squire answered. "Right and wrong."

It was just words, but they burned in him. Scoured his veins clean, cleared his gaze. It felt like he could breathe again, stand straight. It would stay with him, the answer. He would carry it with him wherever he went, sword in hand if he must. Because it wasn't a game, never had been, and if for just a moment people could believe that the graveyard might stop devouring the world.

"Right and wrong," the Black Knight quietly repeated.

And as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the assassin, the Knight Errant finally found he could smile.

—

The Lady had healed up but so had they.

Scribe disappeared early, which was for the best because she'd only get in the way. Yesterday it'd been half a game, at least until the end, but today there was nothing playful about it. There was no tide of devils to put in between, no spare breath to be squeezed out as the world whirled around them. Down here there was only the stone and the water and barrels around them.

That and the years of poison they'd brought in with them.

"He was still wearing those fucking bells when he died," the Silver Huntress snarled. "Did you know that? Did you even care enough to ask?"

Her spear skidded along the Lady's blade, the tip exploding with Light, but she'd already shown that trick before. Creation narrowed to an edge as Ranger cut through the burst of Light with her other sword, flipping her grip to ram the pommel into Alexis' mouth. Teeth broke and the redhead rocked back, might have gotten her throat cut if Indrani didn't leap over a barrel to stab at the Lady's back. Her wrist was caught and Ranger was angling to spin and tossed her into the water when Indrani leaned forward to ram their foreheads together, buying just enough room not to get eviscerated when the Lady's blade came up towards her belly.

She was still thrown, rolling on the stone until she got to her feet. Alexis has spat out blood and teeth, her spear alight in silver as she circled around a pack of barrels to bring the fight to larger grounds. Good call. Space was better for them than

Ranger, especially when Cocky was cooking up surprises behind them. A glance told Indrani she'd opened a barrel with a knife and was studying the contents with wide eyes. Archer cleared her throat, trying to draw her attention so she'd actually toss the concoctions she'd prepared for this fight, but she was ignored.

"John had promise," the Lady calmly said. "He was sharpening. If he'd stayed a few more years instead of run off to play the hero against my instructions, he would still be alive."

"Of course he ran off," Alexis snarled. "You fucking hammered into his head that he wasn't as good as the rest of us, that he needed to prove himself. If it hadn't been the Liesse Rebellion, it would have been any other of a dozen wars. And he would have died in all of them."

Ranger seemed amused.

"If you were so concerned, why did you not accompany Indrani when she went to fetch him?" she asked.

The Huntress' answer was inarticulate rage, leaping forward over a barrel instead of completing a circle. Indrani cursed under her breath, hurrying up. Alexis had gotten baited and paid for it, Ranger on her before she landed on the stone and catching her by the throat. The Huntress was slammed on the floor, hard enough that her bones cracked, and would have gotten a blade through the eye if Indrani hadn't thrown one of her longknives at the Lady's back. Hye Su snatched it out of the air and threw it back without batting an eye, but the heartbeat was long enough for Alexis to wriggle out of the grasp and kick the Lady away. Archer caught her own blade before it could carve through her throat and breathed out in relief, hurrying to the Huntress' side so she would be able to get up without getting killed.

"You need to stay in control, Alexis," Indrani harshly said. "If you get angry, get stupid, you'll die."

Ranger sighed.

"This is sickening," she said. "You need to make a decision, Indrani. Are you trying to win, or are you trying to be liked? Because now you're trying to do both, and you are *failing*."

"Yeah, she's trying," Alexis growled, spitting blood to the side. "It's why she's already better than you. Did you ever find out how Lysander died, Ranger?"

"Disappointingly," the Lady said.

"Alone," Alexis said. "He died alone, not even forty feet away from someone who would have fought at his side. That's what you

taught us. That's your fucking legacy, Ranger. Dying alone, just like you will."

"The difference between us, child," the Lady of the Lake replied, "is that I do not fear it. And that's why you'll lose."

And the thing was, Indrani still admired that answer. It made her blood sing, it was everything she'd decided she wanted of the world as a child. But that couldn't be her, not anymore. Because it'd mean leaving behind Masego, never again curling up by his side to read. Never again talking late into the night. It would mean leaving Cat for good, the laughter and the warmth and the home she'd made herself into. It would mean no more rooftop skulking with Vivienne, no more dicing with Hakram. Hells, she'd even miss Akua and the way they talked trash about everybody else.

Indrani didn't want to stand alone anymore. And maybe she'd die that way anyway, but she wouldn't make herself pretend it'd be a good thing.

"You didn't need to be," Archer said. "Alone. That was a choice."

She'd made it. But had any of them had, or had she made it for them too?

"You'll learn otherwise," Ranger gently said, then her eyes hardened. "Or you'll die. One last lesson for the three of you."

"Here's one for you too," Cocky said.

The thrown vial broke against the floor, small puffs of grey smoke taking to the air and then wildly swelling. The grey began to billow in every direction but neither Indrani nor Alexis hesitated to charge in. They knew exactly what this was, and they were in no danger from it. Ranger was better than either of them at fighting sightless, but there was something to even the odds: the moment she took a swing and Archer parried it, the Lady let out a soft noise of surprise and backed away. Yeah, the smoke was eating away at her gear. Figured she'd notice when blades clashed. The Huntress pushed but had to draw back when she almost lost an eye.

Indrani tried to flank, blades high, but Ranger backed away entirely out of the smoke and it dispersed after a few more moments.

"That explains the smell," the Lady frowned, eyeing her dulled blades and eaten at cape. "You coated all your equipment in a solution to prevent it."

"I still remember when we first met," the Concocter said. "Do you recall the first question I ever asked you?"



"Could you have stopped it," Ranger quoted.

"You didn't," Cocky said. "You let them die, because you didn't care. And that's all you are, isn't it? The absence of caring. That's the sum of you."

"How far you've travelled, Concocter," Ranger said, "to still be standing by that campfire, looking for someone to save you. Is that all you learned of your years as my pupil?"

A glance was flicked at Indrani and Alexis.

"Different saviours to beg salvation from," the Lady of the Lake scorned.

"No," Cocky snarled. "I learned too much from you, Hye Su. Let it sink into my bone like a fucking disease. But I've given you that for too long."

The Concocter smiled, hard and proud, and looked away from the Lady. At the two of them.

"Constanza," she said. "My name is Constanza."

Indrani went still. The Concocter breathed out.

"Let's finish this," she said. "All three of us."

Alexis breathed out, hands shaking.

"Yeah," the Silver Huntress got out through her broken teeth. "Time to end it. Indrani?"

Archer met the Lady of the Lake's eyes.

"One last lesson," Indrani agreed. "For us, and for those we left behind."

Violence ensued. Steel sang and Cocky – Constanza, she thought with wonder – unleashed all she had prepared. The poison cloud that hurt only elves, the sentient drops of hate that hunted the sole person who'd not drunk an obscuring potion, the fumes that turned to glue and the glue that turned into acid. Ranger came for her, seeing her as the weak link, but none of them minded. It told them where the fight would be. Indrani took the first wound, a slice across the face. Cocky the second, an arrow that went through her shoulder. The Lady went third, losing her cloak and the edge of her eyebrow when Archer setup Alexis to detonate her spear next to Ranger's head.

There was no elegance to it. It was simple, brutal attempts to kill. And Gods forgive them, but they were losing. Even with all the tricks and the rage, she was just too fucking good. No pass worked on her twice, and every time a sequence did well against

her the Ranger learned in the moment that followed and turned it back against them. It was like fighting a mirror, only the reflection was *better* than them. Archer fell first, to a kick in the stomach as she parried her death away, but Alexis had overextended. She took a slice across her face, across her right eye, and as she drew back in pain the opening was made. Indrani felt a shout rising up her throat as the Lady darted forward past the two of them.

To Constanza, whose fingers were fumbling over a vial. The sword was swung, the arc smooth and perfect about to take the head of a girl Indrani had known since they were both children. Only it was the Lady that fell instead, taking a hit in the side as a cloaked figure stepped out of nowhere to her left. The Emerald Swords, Indrani thought as she rose to her feet. They must have used the same tunnels. Ranger swatted one away but three more materialized in the heartbeat that followed and there was no room to manoeuvre down here. Another appeared by Alexis's side, striking her knee behind so she'd fall, and Indrani rolled to the side just in time to avoid being skewered by a sixth.

Evidently, the Emerald Swords were done fucking around.

"Cocky," Archer shouted across the din. "This is done. We need to leave."

She backed away from the elf pursuing her, the slender sword seemingly made of wood biting into her longknife like it was made of cheap tin. Fuck. Alexis had gotten away from hers and they came back to back, safe enough that Indrani could spare a look away. Cocky hadn't been targeted, they weren't seeing her as a threat, which meant there were eight of the fucking Emerald Swords fighting the same woman. And, terrifyingly enough, though Ranger was losing it wasn't by a large margin. She was being pressed back, not overwhelmed.

"We grab Constanza and go," Indrani said. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Alexis grunted.

They moved in unison, ducking beneath a blow as Alexis lit up her spear and used the flare to blind their opponents for half a heartbeat. Indrani used the delay to leap over a row of barrels, landing in a roll on the other side as a sword cut through where her belly would have been if she'd been standing. Fuck, she hadn't even heard the elf move. Cocky was, inexplicably, dipping what looked like a long thin stick into the barrel she'd opened earlier instead of *fucking running away*. Another flare of silver Light, then Alexis was with them. Half her face was covered in blood from the cut Ranger had left her with, and that eye might well be a permanent loss.

"What are you doing?" the Huntress snarled, "we need to-"

Constanza reached into the pouch at her side and took out a red gem, idly throwing it at a barrel to their right. The stone hit and got stuck on the wood, then began to shine.

"Fuck," Indrani swore, throwing herself down.

The world exploded in green. Goblinfire. Merciless Gods, the place had been loaded with the largest amount of goblinfire Indrani had ever seen. And there were explosion in the distance, like there'd been other stacks out there. She got back to her feet as Cocky smiled smugly. The roar of the flames had surprised everyone, but it looked like the Lady had been the one to pay for it. She'd gotten run through from the back, Indrani said, and another Emerald Sword had just broken her jaw. A third was about to put his blade through her heart when he suddenly backed away, a chandelier writhing with green flames falling where he'd just been.

The goblinfire was spreading everywhere but nowhere more than near where Ranger still was. Lying on the ground and bleeding out, the elves struggling to get close enough to finish her off.

"All three doors are on fire, you fucking idiot," Alexis said. "How are we supposed to get out of here, Cocky?"

Even the water wasn't an option. It was on fire too, because goblinfire was a goddamned horror.

"By following me," Constanza smugly replied.

She still had that slender stick in hand, and when she pulled away she kept it high. What had to be the goblinfire from the barrel followed it, like a strand of glue, which was weird. Goblinfire wasn't supposed to do that when inert, Indrani was sure of it. She must have done something to the substance while everybody else was looking. They followed her, and as if that stick was a magic wand the Concocter used it to part the flames in front of them. Every time she touched the green fire with the coated end of the stick, it was sucked in up the strand and towards the barrel. Which was not, as far as Indrani could see, burning yet.

"Straight path," Cocky said. "I can only divert so much before the threshold is passed and my barrel blows too. That... won't be pretty. Dragon blood is something of an amplifier."

Oh, that did not sound good at all. Still better than dying in a fire, though, so on Indrani went. And the straight path they were taking through a cage of flames was, inevitably, one that led them straight to the Lady. Still lying down there, bleeding out. There was movement, the Emerald Swords coming, but Cocky was quicker: she flicked her stick, snapping the strand, and a curtain of goblinfire closed behind them. There was a thundering

sound inside a heartbeat later, the barrel finally exploding. But that felt another world away, when they were here looking down at Ranger. The three of them shared a long look.

An understanding came, eventually.

"We could leave you to them," Alexis said, crouching by the Lady's side. "Toss you back in there to die."

"It'd be deserved," Constanza said, crouching on the other. "A long time coming."

"It's one way to end this," Indrani said, meeting her teacher's eyes. "To make sure you don't come for us to even the scales for today. That you don't decide it makes us worth hunting."

"But I still remember when they sent me into the woods to die," Alexis said. "The look on the elderman's face. He thought he was doing right by the village. One girl for all of them. And I never got angry enough to forget that look, Ranger. To remember I swore I'd never be like him."

"I could let them kill you," Constanza said. "Like you let those bandits kill my family. But that's just you winning, isn't it? Me still living by your rules. And I won't have that, not anymore. I'm going to be *better*."

"There's dues, though," Indrani said, knife in hand. "And I have learned a thing or two about long prices. So here's your ending, Lady of the Lake."

The hand came down, the knife slicing deep across the nose. She passed it to Alexis, who cut deep down the left cheek. And she passed it to Constanza, who cut the last down the right cheek.

"They'll scar," Indrani said, knowing it to be true.

"Every time you look at them, remember that you once had pupils," Constanza said.

"And that you might have left marks on us," Alexis grinned through broken teeth, "but we left those on *you*."

A strange expression passed in the Lady's eyes as they rose, one after the other. Indrani did not dare put a word to it. They left her there, lying on the stone as the goblinfire burned behind her. Maybe she'd get up, maybe she wouldn't. Either way, it was on her alone. The three of them left the same way they'd come.

Together.

—

The Dread Empress looked troubled.

Akua was not the only one to have noticed, and all who did were troubled in turn. All of the city knew that Malicia had gathered the court here tonight so that her reign could end in dignity, so that she might try to become Chancellor under the new rising power or otherwise seek mercy. Most would be disinclined to grant it, but Akua Sahelian was said rising power and it would be her decision to make. If she sought to become Dread Empress. If she cared to sit the throne that Malicia was going to empty.

Yet here the empress was, looking troubled. Something must have happened in the receiving room out back. Vivienne had left it in a hurry, and looking harried, while the young man who was the Squire these days had looked oddly serene. Power now wafted from him stronger than Akua had ever felt it, which smacked of a transition – as did the even look of respect he had traded with the Black Knight before they parted ways. A Squire no longer, perhaps. For the best. Akua had struggled to pair the Name with anyone who but the last woman who'd worn it.

What had happened in there? Akua considered her curiosity, then set it aside. It was of no great import. Events were precipitating, and after the empress glanced away her face returned as a lovely mask of control. The doubts gone, and the tension went out of the nobles. All was as it should be. The Dread Empress of Praes would present one last play, and the fate of Praes would be decided by the worthies of this great hall as it had been for centuries.

"She schemes your death," Kendi whispered into her ear. "They all do, or will. One day they will see the truth of you, and all of Praes will recoil."

She considered that.

"Do you like singing, Kendi?" Akua asked.

"My sister did," he smiled, without a single speck of warmth.

"Have you ever heard *The Tyranny of the Sun*?"

He cocked his head to the side, nodded.

"What would you say it's about?" Akua murmured.

The dark-haired man held his tongue, chose his words.

"This very hall," Kendi Akaze finally said, "seen from below."

The Carrion Lord, she thought, really was such a terrible prick. She'd liked that song once, for all that it was maudlin and banned by decree. It had such a pleasant melody. Only now all that she could think of was that it dated back to the Sixty Years war, nearly five hundred years ago, and already the singers

sounded... tired. Of all this around her, of the empire writ in dread. Of the dooms sought to the west, a hundred apiece for every ashen victory. A servant came to her, offering a golden goblet, and she almost smiled. Ah, there it was. She took it in hand but did not drink, dismissing the man. Akua waited in silence, even her supporters standing far from her now that Malicia was seated on her throne.

Out of fear, yes, but not of the empress. None wanted to steal from her moment and earn her ire for it.

"Akua Sahelian," Dread Empress Malicia said.

Silence fell like a blanket over the court. Not a soul dared to move.

"Malicia," she replied.

The older woman smiled.

"Am I not your empress, Lady Akua?"

Akua gently smiled back.

"Are you the empress of anyone at all, Alaya of Satus?"

A shiver in the air. Sharks smelling blood in the water.

"A bold claim," the empress said. "Empty, if no one speaks for you."

And that was the part where her backers were to step forward, speak on her behalf. Make boasts and promises, praise her deeds. It was rare for the throne to be abdicated with a semblance of peace, but hardly unheard of. Some tyrants could grasp that it was over before they found themselves bleeding out on the floor with a knife in the stomach. Some had even spared their predecessor instead of ordering their death as their first decree. All very civilized, an old play put on with fresh colours. And no doubt Malicia had a scheme at work. Malicia always had a scheme, it was her blessing and her curse.

But Akua had not climbed the Tower and walked through the Hall of Screams so that she could dance to the empress' tune.

"No," Akua said.

Surprised silence. She swept the hall with her gaze, saw wariness and greed and hate in the eyes of those around her.

"I am tired," Akua said, and then forced herself to say more, "of this, Malicia. This... play we are to put on. The pretence that you leave this throne willing, that I take it up instead of seize it."

"All of the empire is a stage, Akua Sahelian," the Empress replied. "We play our roles."

"And where did that get you?" Akua asked. "*Playing along.*"

Malicia's face, so lovely and so cold, hardened.

"Those graceless in victory," she said, "are uglier still in defeat. Take care to remember that."

Only, Akua realized, the empress' attention was only half on her. How delightfully insulting. Malicia was looking around, scanning the room under the pretence of matching eyes with highborn. She was looking for someone and Akua happened to know exactly who.

"She's not going to come," the golden-eyed sorcerers said.

Malicia turned to her. Now she had the full attention.

"All that cleverness," Akua mused, "turned to waste by a single mistake."

"You-"

Gods, but she was tired. As if the Tower had eaten the marrow of her bones, left her to walk rattling. Tired and irritated, because what was even the *point* of this?

"Step down," Akua cut in, "or be made to."

The empress looked as if she had been slapped. Akua took a step forward, then two. Malicia looked so utterly at a loss that she almost laughed. The dark amusement running thick through her veins, she raised the golden goblet she'd been handed and tossed it at the Dread Empress of Praes. Who looked like she'd just swallowed a surprised yelp as she ducked out of the way. The goblet clattered against the throne of the Dread Empire, that ancient ghastly thing. The dark liquid dripped down the welded stone and iron, the ancient seat little more than a squat, ugly pile of stones.

Akua advanced, passing by the aghast Malicia without a word. She came to stand by the old thing, trailing a finger down the arm. She turned to offer a smile at the nobles below the dais.

"My ancestor," she told them, "murdered a woman here. Before this very seat."

Her hand left the stone.

"She trusted him," Akua said. "And he plunged a knife in her belly. Left her to bleed out on the floor. And when the life left her eyes, he sat down on the throne and named himself Sinister."

She had them, she could see it in their eyes. The hunger, the want. To be her, to serve her, to fuck her – to eat her whole, swallow up everything that had made her rise and make it their own. What was this empire, if not a covenant of the hungry?

"My mother used to say that Maleficent made an empire, but that it was Subira Sahelian that made it the Dread Empire," Akua said. "She was not without wisdom. And that legacy, that blood, it carries with it a duty."

*You have the master's blood*, the demon bound to the Tyrant's Gate had said. Her line had been there since the first stone was set over another. Masters of dread, makers of horror.

"And so here I stand, where Subira once stood, beholding his work," Akua idly said. "And I wonder – would he still have plunged the knife, knowing what we'd become?"

The crowd shuffled, uneasy. These were not the words they had come here to hear. That was not her role in the play. They should have listened to her more closely.

"There comes a time where one must look back and ask: what purpose does this serve?" Akua said. "One thousand and three hundred years the Dread Empire has stood. Through triumph and disaster, through the darkest pits and the tyranny of the sun. And now, looking back, I ask you: what purpose do we serve?"

Unease thickened. She was mad, they thought. They had chosen a madwoman to lead them. The dark-skinned beauty laughed.

"I struggled with the question," she admitted. "But we do find answers in the strangest places."

What was the difference, between a knot and a noose? *Nothing*, Hakram Deadhand had told her, *until there is a corpse*. And that was the balance of it. The Dread Empire of Praes, was it a knot that could be undone or a noose strangling its people?

One need only look out the window to know the answer.

And so Akua Sahelian touched her sleeve, taking out the terrible gift her enemy had given her. Such a small thing, for the power it held. She touched it to the arm of the throne, the rough stone.

"Nothing," the blood of the original murder told them. "We are not the masters of this place, we are the sacrifice. And so I tell you now: this Dread Empire is at an end."

Smiling, Akua Sahelian struck the match against the throne. It burned bright and, feeling as if finally she could breathe, she dropped it on the throne. Where the goblet had spilled.



There was a heartbeat of utter stillness, as if the world itself had ceased spinning.

Then the throne burned green.

—

The world had been shattered under their feet.

Alaya was a fool. The Intercessor had never even been an ally of convenience, the old monster had known from the start that her scheme was fatally flawed and not said a word. All because she had thought she understood Akua Sahelian, that the girl was her mirror in the generation that followed. That she would want the throne, if only to mend it all. How terribly, utterly wrong she had been. Praes was a game that could be won, but Alaya had not won it. She had lost it, along with her throne, and now she was fleeing with the rest of the crowd like a rat leaving a sinking ship.

The orcs had known, she thought. They had been part of it. How else would they have a gate to Arcadia ready, would they know to herd the panicking nobles through it. They left Creation with a shiver, treading the realm of the fae to breathtaking sight. Higher than a mountain, a great tower of stone and bone rose through clouds and sky until it disappeared into the dark. The Tower's mirror here, seeping malice and madness out of every pore. They all fled from the sight of it, hurrying along a winding path of stone, and at the end awaited a way out.

They returned to Creation as a pack of huddling refugees, eyes drawn high to a sight none of them would forget as long as they lived. The Tower was burning. Like an emerald candle in the night, green flames rose from the bottom to swallow it whole. There was not a soul in the city who would not see it. As far as the Blessed Isle, Alaya thought, they might see the green light searing the sky. Her eyes lowered, finding a silhouette awaiting, and suddenly it fell into place. They were not just below the Tower, they were at the very bottom. At the foot of the sculpted stairs that led to the Tyrant's Gate, and atop those a man was waiting.

The tunic was a simple grey, its belly covered with bandages stained red. But there was no mistaking the man himself, for all that his hair had greyed and he had grown a salt and pepper beard. He watched them, they'd who'd been brought down below the first step one might take to climb the Tower, and smiled. His eyes were green as the flames behind him, the emerald blaze wreathing his silhouette and casting his shadow down over them all.

It slowly sunk in for everyone, as it had for Alaya, that he'd played them all for fools.

"Praes," Amadeus of the Green Stretch calmly said, "is a mould that must be broken."

—

And now everyone was there, the Wandering Bard smiled as she tested the string one last time. Perfectly tuned. She'd had the place from the start, but now she had the time and the officiant. All she needed was — ah, and there came the last missing guest. Catherine Foundling walked out of the dark, power still clinging to her cloak, and looked up through the gloom. Their eyes met, a moment, and she offered Yara a wink. She winked back, making herself comfortable on the stone, and strummed her lute with a practiced hand.

It was time to kill her and doom the world.

"There was once a girl," the Wandering Bard sang, "without a name."

## Chapter 26: Singer; Sung

*"There was once a girl without a name,  
There was a tower no one could claim  
No one remembers why she has climbed,  
Or all those she must have left behind*

—

*The first step is hardest, they told her  
You'll have to walk into the fire  
It will burn away what you once were,  
And always devour a liar*

—

*The second is the longest, they said  
You will walk under the restless dead  
The hanged all crooning from the gallows —  
To join them and rest in the shadows*

—

*Taking the third step is the cruellest —*

*Walk when the moon is at her clearest:  
Love will end with the kiss of the knife,  
Trust is the wager that takes your life*

—

*The last is strangest, she said to them  
The easiest and the most solemn  
For when the tower is yours to claim  
You will have forgotten why you came*

—

*There was once a girl without a name,  
There was a tower no one could claim  
No one remembers why she has climbed,  
Or all those she must have left behind."*

— "The Girl Who Climbed The Tower", author unknown

The moment Scribe had first lied to me I'd known I was in mortal danger.

That lie, the refusal to share something with me she had grasped, was the crack in the stone. It didn't necessarily mean that Eudokia was meant to be my enemy or even the instrument of my downfall, but because of that night I had a blind spot and the Intercessor meant to kill me with it. The trouble was, of course, that knowing I was walking into some sort of trap didn't tell me anything about what that trap was. For all I knew, not walking in was exactly what would get me killed. Guessing games with the Wandering Bard were a good way to lose your fingers, if not outright your life, so instead of sitting in a dark tent to brood and try to make out what her plan was I'd gone on the offensive.

Even when you couldn't find the snake in the grass, you could still set the grass aflame.

So I'd thrown my torch. I got things moving in Ater by ordering Abreha Mireembe and Dakarai Sahel to betray me then throw their support behind Akua. It was a risk, of course. I did not believe that the same woman who had once been the Doom of Liesse would now claim the Tower, but I couldn't be sure. Not when the Intercessor was out there and circumstances in the capital changed by the hour. But it was the lesser risk, so it was the one I took. Then, 'lo and behold, after the grass took fire the

snakes came slithering out. There was some sort of botched coup attempt against Malicia – by High Lady Takisha, apparently – that resulted in the Tower's weather artefacts going wild and covering the capital in vicious storms.

On the surface that was just highborn doing as highborn did, but there'd been one telling detail: the Bard had not intervened to prevent this. Which meant she wanted the storms to delay the resolution of everything in Ater, since little would get moving before my army breached the walls and I wouldn't attack while the capital was a deathtrap. From that I learned that the Bard's game was about the Tower and that she wanted to delay until certain conditions were met. The next step was, naturally to try and figure out what those conditions were. I had almost two weeks to see to that while hailstorms and other unnatural weather ravaged the capital, but immediately I began to feel like I was making a mistake.

It wasn't that we didn't find anything. Between Scribe's contacts and the Jacks I found out quite a bit, including what was to my eye a pretty clear campaign to make sure the High Seats were on the verge of open civil war. Over those two weeks pretty much every High Lord and Lady in Praes was given a visceral, personal motive to despise the others. No way that was a coincidence, and again it pointed at the Tower – and whoever climbed it – being the lynchpin of the Bard's game. Only that wasn't going to work, and I grew increasingly sure none of that was actually the Intercessor's doing at all. This was someone else. Malicia, probably, though I wasn't sure what she intended to get out of it.

It wasn't like the High Seats hating each other would make them like her more.

So the conclusion was that I was being had, and all these games surrounding the Tower were the red herring the Intercessor had laid out for me to pursue. I'd just arrived to that conclusion and was wrestling with the need to second-guess it when I received a gift: my camp was approached by a dozen people from the Green Stretch who claimed to be envoys. Envoys from what, was the natural question, and the answer turned out to be that many of the freeholders – swelled in numbers and skills by deserters from the Legions – had gotten tired of the Tower's shit and they wanted to secede. I was the natural interlocutor for that, it was hard to deny it.

I was still Queen of Callow, the kingdom the Green Stretches was only parted from by a river, and my army was besieging Ater. If I didn't back their play for independence, all they had to look forward to were a few early successes while whoever held Ater was busy settling the empire and then a brutal crackdown when the Dread Empire decided to put its breadbasket back in its place. On every level it made sense that they would come to me, but the

*timing* was what drew my attention. I'd already been approached over the state of goblankind, and now another chunk of Praes was looking for me to decide its fate? I smelled a rat. Someone had a hand in this.

So I heard out the envoys and then put them off, which they didn't like but couldn't really do anything about. Who else were they going to go to? They needed me to settle it for them, I told Vivienne when we discussed it, else nothing would change. And that was the moment it struck me. I looked for the stars again and found them faded. Grown even more distant. So *that* was the trick. The Role I had worn into the fabric of Creation, year after year, was that of a wrangler for Evil. I was the commander of Below's Named, a leader of the nations that kept no faith with angels. And looking back now, when was it exactly that the Intercessor had first seriously tried to kill me?

The Arsenal, once the Truce and Terms had been in place long enough they began to have the taste of law. The Intercessor did not care in the slightest if I was influential with *nations*. I could be Queen of Callow or First Under the Night and she'd shrug. Kingdoms weren't the weave for her loom. But when I'd become the representative for Evil, when Hanno had become one for Good, we'd changed things. It used to be that there were only Gods and Named, with the Intercessor in between, but that was no longer true. Now Named looked to either the White Knight or the Black Queen when they had grievances: there was another intermediary.

And how could such a thing ever be acceptable to an entity that the Original Abomination himself had called the *Intercessor*?

We were infringing on her power. Reducing it in a real, practical way. Just spreading about the knowledge of her existence had been enough to hamper her severely, hadn't it? There could be no more sneaking her way into a Band of five to tug at the strings up close and personal, not when her Name was known to everyone in our charge. Only it was even worse, because now I was directly claiming power that'd once been hers alone. More than once I'd called her the goddess of stories, but my Name was already beginning to steal fire from her hearth. I could already feel Named and I'd not even come into my mantle properly. How much more would I to do when I did?

So I must die, that much was a given. But that wasn't enough. I had to be killed in a way that undid the groove I'd worn into Creation, otherwise she was just kicking the trouble down a few years. If someone else took up my Role it'd be just as unacceptable, so more than just slitting my throat she had to undo the very Role I'd cobbled together. Which was why suddenly everyone was knocking at my door, bringing their troubles with them and asking me to fix it all. The Intercessor's power was not

in destruction, it was in the nudge – so she was trying to nudge my Role. I was on the cusp of my Name coming together and if I settled the goblins, settled the Green Stretch, then I was forging my Name into a tool to move those forces.

About the disputes of borders and kings, the lands that had forged me into the ruler I was today. I would not be the Black Queen, that Name had been destroyed too thoroughly at the Folly, but it would not be so far. I would be a ruler over Evil. But not over Named, save those sworn to me. That was why I'd been able to feel Vivienne even though she was a heroine instead of a villain, I suspected. I would rule over some Names in the same way that a Dread Empress did, based on authority. But the sight of the stars in the dark would fade entirely away, that door closed. So I avoided speaking so much as a word to either goblins or the Green Stretch envoys, knowing it would give the Bard her victory, and looked for the final blow. There would be a third., because there was always a third. And looking back at the storm over Ater, I found my answer: the Bard had not stopped that disaster. She wanted the delay, because her third had not yet arrived.

It'd been two weeks away, the very orcish horde we'd all been following as it marched south on Ater. There was a Name among it, a powerful one, and I had thought it to be Hakram but it shone too brightly for that. Or perhaps, I'd thought, it just shone too brightly to be the Adjutant. Either way, there was only one thing to do. Against Juniper and Vivienne's protests, I refused to send envoys to the horde as it approached and forbade the Army of Callow from approaching the Clans. If it truly was Hakram leading the orc clans, then I could not risk conversation with him. I knew myself well enough to be aware that I'd be sucked in the moment we sat at the same table and that might very well be a disaster.

To beat the Bard, I had fight the same instincts that'd kept me alive all those years and take a step back. Do nothing. How restless and unhappy that made me ended up making me more certain than ever I'd finally caught my enemy's tail. And though there was a price to my abstention, there was also a prize. I had abandoned a path for my Name to take and embraced another, how could that be without consequence? After the Battle of Kala I'd come to see some Named as stars shining in the black, but my own Name was precipitating. Strengthening. It was more than just the stars, now, I could see *trajectories*. Objects in motion. And those paths were the paths their stories would take if they were not meddled with.

I'd seen only villains this way and earned splitting headaches trying to go further, but it'd opened doors for me.

When the storm ended, when the orcs approached and the confluence at the Tower neared its resolution, I acted. Regardless of the

Bard trying to break my Role, she'd be using a knife to slit my throat so I set about removing them from the field. I sent the Ranger's three pupils out in the city to face her, knowing one way or another that confrontation would remove her from play – either she'd lose and be defeated or she'd defeat them and lose interest. I sent out the Squire to collect the Black Knight's head, but she slipped my noose after my own father let loose thousands of giant spiders into *districts still full of civilians*. The chaos that act of lunacy unleashed on Ater flipped the orderly board I'd been setting up.

Fine, so that round was a wash. I bailed out Archer and her companions when Ranger looked close to a win, knowing my side would benefit from there being a rematch – she struck me as unlikely to learn a lesson or come to an understanding that'd sharpen her Name, while I'd made a career out of betting on angry young women bringing it home. It wasn't a total wash, even though the Clans stumbled into the mess and the Army of Callow had to pull back all the way to the eastern walls. I finally knew where my father was and I got an idea of what he was after through Arthur's report, which had me adjusting my plans. I still had to avoid the Clans, and avoiding thinking about why lest I falter, but I knew where the fulcrum was now.

It wouldn't be the battle for Ater but the Tower itself, all signs pointed to it. So far I'd avoided the Intercessor's knives, so all I needed to do was ride this out to the end and I would get what I wanted. Which was more than just getting the East in order. Oh no, after all this I wouldn't be settling for so small a prize. Masego and I had already faced the Bard once, in the Arsenal, and this time she would not be getting away so lightly. And what we'd get out of her might well win us this war. She had set a trap for me, but I would turn it into a trap for her.

If the Tower was to be the battlefield, then I ought to take care of loose ends. Following Malicia's trajectory in the dark told me she was about to kill herself. Not with her own hands, but by following through a plan that'd kill her because of a fundamental mistake. I couldn't *what* mistake exactly, just that the groove would be 'villain fails to understand the other and gets her comeuppance'. Had to be either Akua or my father, I figured, but hard to tell. More importantly, it was a stable trajectory – and that meant the odds were good the Intercessor would be using it for something. I didn't need to know for what to know it was better to disrupt it.

She was best removed from the board before the resolution came, so I sent in Assassin and then threw in Squire as well when I saw that the Black Knight had hit the resolution of staying true to her ideals. That likely meant protecting Malicia, so I could call in Arthur's last part of the pattern of three to allow Assassin its clear shot at the Dread Empress. With Vivienne riding herd on

the situation, the matter should be handled. I couldn't step in myself, much as I wanted to. If my boots were on the ground, the chances were too high that the Intercessor would be able to entangle me. I had to keep away until the end, act through intermediaries.

The irony of needing to fight exactly like the Intercessor to beat her did not escape me.

I disliked the idea of being blind in the Tower when it was where it would all come to a head, so I sent Archer and the other two after Ime. They were escorting Scribe, who I meant to take over the Eyes after their current mistress was eliminated – once she had, I'd get the stream of information I needed. Even better, I'd know *more* than the Intercessor in some ways. We could both follow Named, but I'd be the one with actual spies. It was the edge I needed, and it couldn't hurt to blind Malicia anyway. Masego I kept on task, I couldn't spare him for anything else, and Ishaq I had another use for. Apprentice I sent out to have a look at something else, an errand to keep her busy and away from what I didn't want the Bard to see.

With all that loosed, I found a rooftop to stand on the edge of. Waited for moving parts to come together. And my Name sang in joy, coiling around me. Began to bloom inside me. I already had an aspect almost fully formed, I found. Something I'd done again and again, something that aligned with what I saw as my Role in the great machine that was Creation. It felt deep and quiet, like the bottom of a well. But it wasn't even that revelation that had me smiling. I could see, now. Just small things, but it was a start. I caught pieces of Malicia watching the city from above, of Archer leading her companions through the tunnels beneath Ater.

And when the conflict came, I saw that too. The trajectory of my defeat: Ranger stepping in before Ime could be taken, freeing her to arrive just in time to derail Malicia's assassination. But I scored a victory as well, when the Lady of the Lake's three pupils left her bleeding on the ground. She'd survive, but she was done for the night. And Archer had created an opportunity for me without knowing it, one I took even knowing it might cost me my throat. I dipped out to see to it, returning just in time to see the last pieces coming together. The Tower was burning, my father was triumphant and the last test had come upon us all. Everyone was there, nobles and orcs and goblins and even the Black Knight. I came out of the Ways in a whisper of darkness, catching a glimpse of the Bard on a darkened rooftop and offering her a wink.

I had brought three knives here tonight – one up my sleeve, one waiting and one veiled. Time to see which of us had the sharpest blades.



Scribe was waiting for me in the dark of the street, eyes patient. I pulled my cloak tight, watching the nobles huddled at the bottom of the stairs that I could see from the side.

"Report," I ordered.

"Malicia abdicated, Akua Sahelian refused the throne and struck the match that set the Tower aflame," Eudokia said.

I kept the triumphant smile that itched to break out away from my face. So close to the end, gloating would be dangerous. Even if I'd been right, even though I'd seen the truth of her. It had not been a mask. It had been her, and now we would begin the last part of our journey together.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Malicia's in the crowd," Scribe said. "We lost track of the other one. She left the Tower, though, that much I'm certain of."

"She won't die like that," I quietly said. "She'll be here. She wouldn't-"

Movement caught my attention. She was stunning, I thought, it pale and gold. Like some ancient goddess of dusk come to witness the death of empire, a wisp of impossible beauty unmarred by the grime of Creation. And Akua, eyes hooded, gracefully folded her legs and sat at the bottom of the stairs. Lower than my father, but still higher than anyone else. And with that, the end had begun.

"Is this all your doing then, Carrion Lord?" High Lady Takisha called out. "You burned and bled us so that we would kneel to Dread Emperor Black?"

"Did you not hear?" my father smiled. "The Dread Empire is dead."

I glanced at Scribe. I'd had my doubts his plan would work, but just in case I'd set Apprentice to look for one of the indicators that'd follow if he had succeeded.

"What did Apprentice report?" I whispered.

"Last word is that the Tower in Arcadia is aflame too," she murmured.

I grimaced. Amadeus was calling it too early, then. Until the monstrous mirror of the real thing was broken in Arcadia as well, I wouldn't bet on his work destroying Praes lasting too long. If he wanted to stick the landing, he still had to sell his story. To these people and to Below.

"No one here will kneel to you," High Lord Jaheem scorned. "This is nothing more than the tantrum of a man knowing he could never claim the Tower himself."

"What Tower is there left to claim, Jaheem Niri?" the Carrion Lord gently asked.

The sky was burning green behind him and they shivered.

"The Dread Empire failed," he said. "And so it died. It will not return."

"And what would you have instead?" High Lady Takisha challenged. "King Amadeus is no better than Dread Emperor Black. I'll not have it."

Murmurs of appreciation.

"There is a precedent," my father said, sounding faintly amused. "This land has been ruled without a tyrant before."

Sure, before Maleficent the First and the Miezans. It'd been a pack of squabbling petty kingdoms, much like Callow. Only somehow I doubted that was his plan, given that I'd inherited my tendency for centralizing authority from the man. Similar skepticism came from the crowd. A few scorned him out loud for wanting to split up Praes into lesser kingdoms.

"Are you so unfamiliar with our own history?" Akua laughed. "He does not speak of the Many Kingdoms. Or has Haider's Reign already faded from all your memories?"

That was vaguely familiar, but not. I glanced at Scribe.

"The Throneless Years," she murmured, looking spellbound as she watched the discussion. "It's what highborn call it."

Ah, I thought. That was why the name was familiar. Haider had been the Chancellor's name. It was old history from the Sixty Years War, which Dread Empress Regalia II had begun by invading Callow while it was still occupied by Procer. She'd died long before its end, even as the Fairfaxes reclaimed parts of the kingdom and it became a three-way brawl, and her successor Maledicta II's early victories ended in defeat and then assassination after repeat purges of the imperial court. Maledicta had killed most of the leading nobles that could easily take the throne, though, so it turned into a messy civil war around Ater as Callow took the time to force the last Procerans out. With no clear winner in the civil war, the Chancellor – Haider – proposed a compromise.

The lords and ladies of Praes would instead march west against Callow, and whoever distinguished themselves the most in the

conquest of the kingdom would climb the Tower when the war was at an end. Haider would, meanwhile, rule as Chancellor much as he would have had Dread Emperor gone to war westward and left him in charge. The High Seats had accepted the compromise and the 'Throneless Years' lasted for two decades while the Praesi fought my countrymen as well as each other. As a military strategy it was a failure, since the Praesi made alliances with Callow against their rivals, but it did keep the civil war out of the Wasteland until the lord that would become Dread Emperor Vindictive I seized the Blessed Isle.

He cut off the supplies for the armies still west and closed the gates. Once his last rivals were dead beneath his walls, he marched on Ater and took it by force before crucifying the Chancellor. A charmer, that one.

And though it was thin grounds, I thought, my father was not wrong to bring it up. It was a precedent for rule by someone else than a Dread Emperor with no higher authority above them. Only what was the point of all this, if he was just going to torch the Tower and then replace one title by another? So long as the Role beneath did not change, nothing would. And the Tower in Arcadia would keep burning, but in time the flames would fade and the old abomination would rise anew.

"There have been Chancellors before that were Duni," Sargon Sahelian mildly said.

A wave of surprise. It was not endorsement, but it was not dismissal either. I frowned. *Why?* When I'd spoken with him in Wolof, he'd made it clear that he wanted my father nowhere near any sort of throne. What had changed? My answer came in the form of a shadow standing behind the green-eyed man, an aged woman finally arrived. Ime, still mistress of the Eyes of the Empire. Who was, by the gesture, declaring the Eyes supported him. My fingers clenched. Ah, so that was why. Ime had taken out Sargon's soulbox when the Tower burned out. It was now my father who held his leash.

"Are we going to entertain this masquerade?" High Lord Dakarai scorned. "It is becoming Dread Emperor in all but name. Just a fig leaf."

"The days of tyrants who ruled until death are behind us. The Chancellor will rule for seven years and one," the Carrion Lord replied. "Not dawn longer."

My eyes narrowed. There were flaws with that, obvious one. How would the Chancellor be chosen, what would keep High Seats from starting civil wars to depose them? My concerns were shared by some. High Lady Takisha let out a mocking laugh.

"And why should any of us obey such person?" she asked. "We would be the greater in every way."

"Because on this very night," the Carrion Lord said, "every army in Praes save the Legions of Terror will be disbanded."

Pandemonium. Half the nobles were screeching in anger, the rest jeering.

"A jest in poor taste," High Lord Jaheem said. "You have gone mad in your old age, Carrion Lord, to think we would meekly bend the knee to this. *Why should we?*"

The green-eyed man grinned.

"One vote," he told them.

*Oh, I thought, you wily fucker.* And he'd got their attention.

"Every High Seat will get to either name a candidate for Chancellor or cast a vote in the election," the green-eyed man said. "So will Ater, the Clans and the Confederation of the Grey Eyries returned to the fold."

And I saw it in the crowd, the hunger. Taking the Tower by force, it was tricky business even if it went perfectly. Tricky and costly. But here he was, offering them an easier way. The High Seats would have the majority of the votes – Wolof, Okoro, Nok, Aksum and Kahtan. Assuming Foramen kept its vote, there would be two goblin votes and one for the orcs. Ater would be loose vote, a ninth one to ensure there could be no ties. They had a clear majority, but that was where he'd been tricky: you could either nominate or vote, but not both. Alliances. He was forcing whoever wanted to be the Chancellor, the power in Ater, to earn the support of a majority of Praes.

And if anyone tried to go against the result, the sole army in Praes – the Legions of Terror – would grind them into fucking dust. They didn't get a vote, and I'd bet rubies to piglets that being part of the Legions would disqualify you from being nominated. My father was leaving enormous power in the hands of the High Seats, which had to gall him, but realistically speaking he couldn't break their influence without twenty years of brutal civil war. Instead he was consigning their influence to the political, which there was no taking away from them without extermination anyway, and making sure they had no *military* power. It was the kind of compromise I'd honestly not expected him to be able to make.

"And you support this, Lady Akua?" High Lord Dakarai asked.

Vivienne believed he'd genuinely flipped to become a supporter of Akua, this one, and I was beginning to be convinced as well.

"The Age of Wonders is dead," Akua Sahelian quietly said. "Are we to follow it into the grave? Scorn him if you wish, but I hear none offering a brighter tomorrow."

And that was another hit. It shook them, enough that the crowd began to hesitate. They didn't like him, didn't like this, but what else was on the table? And they had to know that if they didn't come to an accord, if they all fled back to their cities, Praes would collapse. Without something to bind it together, a new heart, the High Seats would turn into kingdoms and make war on each other once more. And after years of civil war, no one here was hungry for more slaughter. Many began to discuss it, but it was High Lord Sargon who broke the stalemate.

"Wolof nominates Amadeus of the Green Stretch for Chancellor," Sargon crookedly smiled.

It was a challenge as well as a statement. Speak or walk away.

"I nominate myself for Chancellor," High Lady Takisha replied through gritted teeth.

Ah, and there went the southern half of Praes.

"The Clans vote for Amadeus of the Green Stretch," Hakram calmly said.

My fingers twitched at the sight of him. There was no denying it now, was there? He was the Warlord. He was lost to me. I forced it down. I could not afford distractions right now.

"Foramen votes for Amadeus of the Green Stretch," High Lady Wither said, then cackled. "So does the Confederation of the Grey Eyries."

Surprise and fear. Ater could have no vote, not in this election, and so four of the eight who'd speak already had. One more and my father would be the Chancellor of Praes.

"Your opinion on the right to rule of the undead, lord?" Abreha Mireembe called out.

He grinned, all teeth and malice.

"Acceptable," he replied.

The old corpse grinned back. I could have stopped her from speaking, I knew. Pull at the strings. But not now, not when I was so close to getting the outcome I wanted – my father on something like a throne, Praes in hands I could trust.

"Aksum votes for the Carrion Lord," High Lady Abreha called out.

And just like that it was over. Dakarai Sahel voted for him as well and Jaheem Niri nominated himself, but it was already settled. Rising to his feet, the bandages on his side flecked with red, my father smile.

"Then for my first decree I dissolve every private army in Praes," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said. "And charge the Legions of Terror to enforce the result of any and all elections."

Nim stood high above the crowd, and through her helm I thought I glimpsed eyes gone watery. She was moved.

"We will take up the duty with pride," the Black Knight replied.

He offered her a fond smile.

"As for my second decree," the Chancellor, "we will begin negotiations to sign onto the Liesse Accords. We will bargain with the Grand Alliance."

I swallowed a grin. I was still furious at him, deep down. What he'd unleashed on the city... But he'd always been a monster. I'd known that from the start. The reason I'd come to love him anyway was just before my eyes. He was going to do it. He was going to get Praes in line and join the war.

"Are we to bleed for Procer, then?" High Lord Jaheem coldly asked.

"We earn our place at the table, so that we might bend the terms," he easily replied. "And if you worry of the costs, perhaps you should remember the last Throneless Years."

Puzzlement.

"Callow was meant to be the proving grounds deciding who would claim the Tower," he reminded them. "Let Keter serve the same purpose. When my eight years come at an end, who better than the victors of the war against the Original Abomination himself?"

Ah, the appeal to pride. No lack of that here to use. There was some back and forth, questions and answers, but my attention was elsewhere.

"So?" I asked.

"We'll know soon," Scribe replied.

The runner came back with word from Sapan quick enough. Scribe grimaced.

"The Tower is broken," she said. "But it still stands."

*Fuck*, I thought. It wasn't over yet. It was exactly what I'd been afraid of: I was going to have to bless this. Like a queen kissing a baby, I'd have to signify my approval before it came to an end. And that meant stepping into it. I breathed out. Not too far from here I could feel the Night I had invested, the knot of smooth power. I'd taken the precautions I could, I reminded myself. Now I just needed to wade in and see if I'd beaten the Bard or if this was all going to turn to ash. I steadied myself, patted Eudokia's shoulder and strolled out around the corner.

It took a moment for people to notice me. It was dark out and they were talking and there were many of them. But in time they did, and the sound of chatter died. Soon not one of them dared even to breath too loud, leaving only the sound of my deadwood staff clacking against the stone as I limped forward. Some part of me gloried in it. In the terrifying figures of my youth now going still at the sight of me. At the fear in their eyes. Once, as a young girl, I had seen my father silence an entire banquet hall simply by entering it. I'd sworn, that night, that one day I would have that power to.

I'd kept my oath.

"Black Queen," my father greeted me.

"Carrion Lord," I replied. "Or should it be Chancellor now?"

"Either will suffice," he said.

"Chancellor, then," I mused.

I swept the assembled nobles with my gaze. Only one met it: Akua's golden eyes met mine. She was on her feet now, but her face distant. As if unconcerned with all this. Waiting for it to end.

"You speak for Praes now," I said.

"I do," he replied.

"Then you answer for Praes as well," I mildly said.

He conceded the point with a half-nod.

"I am not unaware that we have earned enmity," my father replied. "Reparations will be offered."

"It will take more than gold to even those scales," I coldly said.

"And I offer more than that," he easily replied. "Our signature on the Liesse Accords, yes, but a more immediate boon as well."

I cocked my head to the side.

"I'm listening."

"I have a way to even the odds against the armies of Keter," he told me.

I stilled. Well now, there was a princely offer. Below us both, some of the nobles smiled. For people who largely despised him, they were warming up to the regime rather quickly.

"A worthy price," I said.

He cocked an eyebrow.

"But?"

"There is one thing more," I said. "One among you allied with the Dead King even as he sought to destroy all of Calernia. One of you sabotaged and attacked the Grand Alliance at every occasion. That offence needs answering."

"Careful now," the Carrion Lord softly warned.

I met his eyes with my sole one, undaunted.

"Give me Alaya of Satus," I evenly said. "Who was once empress. Give me the hand behind the Night of Knives and a hundred enmities since."

*Give me Ratface's killer, I thought. Give me the reason I had to come to the Wasteland when the world is dying.*

"The Grand Alliance," he said, "does not get to make such demands."

My fingers tightened.

"Careful now," I echoed. "Do you think that, after these last few years, Praes can make any demand at all?"

"It does not have to be this way," he quietly said.

"It does," I coldly replied.

Because Praes had gotten away with this for too long. And I loved him like a father, even after this latest monstrosity, but that did not mean he got a pass. That burning the Tower would end it all. Praes would pay one last price in blood for the horrors it had unleashed on us all. Let the slate be called clean after that, but not before. I glanced down into the crowd and found the woman who had been the Dread Empress of Praes this morning. Alaya of Satus looked... tired. Her beauty had not waned, but the elaborate green dress hung loosely on her. She looked tired and afraid, I thought. She met my eyes with resignation. She saw her death in me.



I had thought I would take pleasure in this. Now I felt almost ashamed. It still needed to be done.

"Then I'm sorry," my father told me.

He descended a few steps and my eye followed him down. Hakram had risen up a few steps until they stood side by side. Their heights made it look almost comical, but there was no humour to be found now. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach, like I'd just made a mistake.

"No," the Warlord said.

My face turned into a blank mask. I set aside the feeling of betrayal, raw and bloody as it was.

"Warlord?" I flatly asked.

Hakram's face was as carved out of stone.

"I have sworn an oath that the Clans will not march against Keter if Alaya of Satus is taken," the Warlord said. "I will stand by it."

My father's face was not apologetic, but there was not a speck of joy to be found in it. Behind them, I found the mood was matching. Some of the nobles were smiling, once more, and when I looked at the others – well, the orcs were a given but I found no purchase with Wither either. I had not struck a bargain with either her or the Grey Eyries, and now that decision was coming back to haunt me.

"The way to even the odds against Keter for her life," Amadeus calmly said. "That is the bargain."

And I considered it, for a moment. Maybe if I made a compromise, then – and immediately I let out a soft gasp. The stars were dying. The black was fading. The Name itself, after all this time, was waning. And in that moment, I finally understood the trap that the Intercessor had laid out for me. I'd told dozens of people I had come here to kill Malicia. High nobles and Named, rulers and simple soldiers. It was one the thing about this campaign I'd never wavered about or hidden. I had staked my reputation on it. And now, on this final night where my Name was to form, I was being forced to walk back those words. I had come here to assert power over the East, and now the East was throwing that claim back in my face rejecting it.

*It was never only Named or nation*, I realized with dim horror. I'd always needed to have *both*. I'd just been tricked into thinking it was a choice. And so now that I was on the verge of losing one entirely, I was on the verge of destroying my own Name before it could form. I'd understood what the Intercessor was

after all this time, but I had been entirely, terribly wrong about how she was going to do it. It'd been about this the whole time. She had made sure that my father would win and Malicia would survive just to ensure that this very moment would come about. And now I had the choice to either throw away a Name that might win us the war tonight – Gods, what Masego and I had planned! – or... I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. Or assert my authority over them the hard way.

Kill them.

I had been a hard girl and I'd become a harder woman, but I still flinched at the thought of that.

"If she dies," I quietly told them, "the war could be won tonight."

I saw that sink in, and even as in their eyes the realization of a mistake bloomed I felt my stomach clench. How very deeply I had been manipulated. I'd kept my distance from all of them for fear of them being used as a knife against me, but that'd been nothing more than a shadow on the wall. Now the knife was being pointed at my throat *precisely because I'd not spoken with either of them*. I the distance I heard notes of a hauntingly familiar tune, sung by a heartbreakingly beautiful voice. The only person who'd had all the information was up there on that roof, smiling as we all stumbled in the dark. I closed my eye, then opened it. Breathed out. Found the frozen calm at the heart of me, the ice.

"Step aside," I said, and it was nothing less than an order.

"And who are you to demand that?" Amadeus asked. "It is a conqueror's demand, and you have not conquered here."

The wants of the woman, I thought, and the needs of the queen. Hakram saw it in me first, took half a step back. I loved them both. Hakram more than my father, perhaps, but both deeply. But that was just me. I could make another Warlord. I could force another Chancellor to kneel. But to gain my victory over the Bard, there was only tonight. And that victory, I thought as I felt like weeping, might save millions. What we'd planned, Masego and I... What did two lives matter in the face of that? I could love them all I wanted, but I had buried people I loved before. Two lives against millions.

Gods damn us all.

"I am," I replied, "your keeper."

It rang out, loud and clear, without my ever having raised my voice.

"There might come a time where you earn a kind hand, a protector, but not tonight," I coldly said. "Instead you earned me. You dealt out evil and it has been returned to your gate, but you think that at this hour of reckoning you can flee from your dues?"

I struck my staff against the steps and the stone cracked, split as if the very earth knew my anger. They backed away, both

"*Who am I?*" I hissed. "I am Below's watchman, the enforcer of the black laws, and I tell you now that if you do not settle your debt in full then I will cast your shivering souls out into the darkness from where is no return."

Power coursed through my veins, the open maw of a great beast just my ear. If could feel its warm breath, the eagerness in the fang. It wanted blood. An old friend returned at my side.

"I am the Warden of the East," I told them, and it became true. **"Step aside."**

My words rang with power and Hakram had to fight it, but my father only froze half a beat. I met his eyes then. That eerie pale green, and behind them I saw fearsome thing I always had. Cold gears of steel, turning. Grinding. And the mind behind it, as he had once told me, worked only one way. *In the face of conflict, he'd confessed that night, I will reduce all individuals involved to instruments, and seek what I consider the best outcome.* I'd never seen it happen before, him finding its path and committing to it. Power pulsed heavy in the air. Something old and deep, something beyond even the Sisters. He was calling in his dues to Below, as Hune once had.

A heartbeat later he had a knife in hand and I flicked my wrist, the leather contraption Pickler had made me bringing his first gift to my palm.

He took half a step up, and flush as I was with the power of my Name I saw him move. My neck, the blade would bite into my neck. I took half a step down, already seeing it happen in my mind's eye. The blow would draw blood, but not deep enough. Mine would not miss. I let out a ragged breath, half a scream, and as we embraced steel found flesh. My knife, my gift, bit deep found the heart. And I felt a cold edge against the side of my neck. No, I realized dimly. Not the edge. *The side.* He'd not so much as pricked my skin. I broke away, but could not part too far. He was slumping already, but on his place face I found a twitching smile.

In the distance, a lute made a false note.

"No," I whispered. "No, no, no – Father *why did you do that.*"

"Forced your hand," he murmured. "You have to spare her now. There's no one else who can replace me."

And he was right. The High Seats all hated each other now, there was no one else left who could possibly rule except Akua. And she would refuse it. We slumped to the ground together, my leg throbbing with pain, and I reached for Night. Tried to stop the damage. It did nothing, as if some force was devouring the power. He had, I remembered with horror, called in his dues to Below.

"It didn't have to be this way," I croaked.

"It'll take blood to finish it," he rasped. "It always does."

"You hate martyrs," I cursed him.

"This is Praes," he smiled. "What is one more sacrifice?"

"You fucking fool," I wept.

Tears. How long had it been, since I had wept tears? The lute again, in the distance. The melody was smooth.

"Proud of you," he got out. "So proud. My daughter."

And what kind of a man would say that to the girl whose knife was still in his heart?

"Monster," I accused.

The green eyes softened.

"The very worst kind," he smiled.

He clutched my hand.

"Please," he asked. "Goodbyes."

Face grimly set, I rose away. The knife I left in him. It was the only thing keeping him alive. Alaya of Satus came without needing to be called. There were tears, I saw at the corner of her eyes. She knelt by his side, all of us watched by a hundred eyes, and what they whispered at first I did not hear. But the end I did.

"It was both of us," my father got out. "Both."

It was getting harder from him to talk.

"It shouldn't have come to this," Alaya whispered.

"Do better," he said. "Do it right, this time. For the both of us. Make it as it should have been."

"I, I can't-"

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

Her face, I thought was the picture of anguish.

"Always," Alaya of Satus hoarsely replied.

"We'll win," he promised, threading their fingers. "Be free."

In the distance, the empire burned green. With a last rasping breath, he laid down on the steps of Tower and died. I'd killed my father for the third time, and this time it was true. And I knew, without asking or knowing how I knew, that when the message from Apprentice came it would tell me the Tower in Arcadia had broken. I breathed out raggedly, and the sound of it covered the footsteps.

The knife sunk through my ribs, but it stopped before it could reach my heart.

Not because Scribe had stopped striking but because she was dead. The sword, shining red and wetly in the light of the half-moon, ripped clear out of her skull. The last wisps of the veil faded as the Barrow Sword flicked away the blood from the edge. Eudokia slumped to the ground, eyes lifeless. The moment Scribe had first lied to me I'd known I was in mortal danger. And now I knew what it was that she'd kept from me. That my father would, whatever the cost to him or anyone at all, keep Alaya of Satus alive. I put a hand against my side as I limped away. It came away red. I seized Night, slowed it down, but I could not heal. It would have to suffice.

Of the three knives I had brought, two had found blood. Only one remained.

"He didn't buy you your life," I said.

Alaya of Satus, once-empress of Praes, met my eye unflinchingly. Hers were as red as mine, but what did that change? I had loved him, but I was still the Warden of the East. I would still collect the dues.

"I thought as much," she said. "Seven and one?"

I nodded.

"And when the first dawn of the ninth year comes," I quietly said, "I will come for you."

She did not answer for a long moment, looking down at his corpse.

"Eight years will already be too long," she quietly said.

I stood in silence as I watched the greats of Praes gather again for the election of their Chancellor. The votes, this time were

unanimous. It was done. Only one last thing remained. I took back the knife from my father's corpse.

"Won't you come out?" I asked. "You failed, Yara. I still live."

A snort from behind me.

"Well, you're already well on your way to being dead inside," the Intercessor said, frowning down at my father's corpse. "Gods, what an unreliable prick in the end. Didn't think there was that much of a person left in him."

"Your mistake," I said.

"If he'd been Named it would have worked," she sighed, "but you don't have that many blind spots left. Balls. Next one will be our last, I think. You can have this one – you've got to be getting used to the taste of ashes in your mouth."

"No," I quietly replied.

"No?" she repeated, amused. "Then why do you keep swallowing them?"

"There won't be a next time," I said. "This ends tonight."

She rolled her eyes. Then a heartbeat later, she cocked an eyebrow.

"So that's why you kept Hierophant back," the Intercessor said, then shrugged. "You're getting repetitive, Cat. You gonna try your Arsenal play again? You ought to-"

The silver harpoon took her in the side. It didn't break flesh, but it sunk deep. Eyes shining under the eyecloth, Masego ripped his way out of the Twilight Ways and strode onto Creation as the barrier between realms screamed in pain. The glass eyes lingered on my father's corpse, then on Scribe's.

"You-"

His long, clever fingers closed around the harpoon and he tugged. The Bard's scream interrupted her own words.

"When I am done with you, Intercessor," the Hierophant said in a calm, even tone, "there is nothing Above or Below that will be able to put you back together."

I shivered, as much because of the mildness of the delivery as the words.

"You can do nothing," the Wandering Bard hissed. "You think it's not been tried before? I can't die, you fools, and pain just-"

"This isn't about death," I said. "It isn't even about pain. This is about *loss*."

I glanced at Masego and he nodded without turning. I put a hand by his own on the silver harpoon's shaft. The sorcery he held washed through the both of us, thundered through our veins. And I glimpsed it, just for a moment, what she saw. The lay of it. Like a city seen from the sky, a maze of turns and twists only they were all stories. People. All the stories in the world.

"As I thought," Hierophant said. "It will take two."

"Better this way," I spoke through gritted teeth. "I'll finish it myself."

He ripped out the harpoon, and even as the Intercessor hoarsely shouted I saw half the world disappear. We'd stolen it, Hierophant and I. Half the stories in the world, we'd stolen them from her. Above's stories were gone from her sight, from her soul. They'd make a decent enough present for the Warden of the West, but before that it was time to take my half. I took her by the throat and my beast laughed, laughed in a way that sounded like a howl.

"Can you taste them yet, Yara?" I whispered. "The ashes?"

And she opened her mouth to answer, or so I thought, but I saw only red. She'd bitten off her own tongue, I realized. And she was choking herself to death. I tried to save her, keep her alive longer, but the moment the Night touched her she was gone. I could almost feel her, feel her eyes on me. Feel the utter, absolute fury. And when I reached out for my Name, for the stars in the black and the stories they followed, I saw a shiver go through the world. They stopped. All of them, stopped. The Names still existed, but they no longer moved.

"Oh Gods," I whispered.

We had stolen half the stories in the world from the Intercessor. And now, in her wroth, she had *killed the other half*. It was gone, like vanished in the air. Below's Named were no longer bound by stories. And Above's had been wrested from the Intercessor, *but we didn't know how to use them*. I found one star brighter than all the rest, followed, and glimpsed what lay within.

A dead man sat on a throne, still as the corpse he was.

"Interesting," the Dead King said, and if a skull could smile he would have.

Oh Gods, I thought again. Villains no longer had stories. There was no longer anything holding him back. The sigh faded, leaving me to stand alone as the sky burned green above me.

I had just doomed us all.

## Interlude: End Times

*"Better the tiger atop the mountain than the wolf at your feet."*

– Praesi saying

Antigone had been just a little too slow to stop it.

That would have been enough to unsettle Hanno even if he'd not just seen the Tomb, the great lake that separated Hainaut from the Kingdom of the Dead, freeze over. A horde whose numbers dwarfed the stars in the sky had already begun to march across the thick ice, a tidal wave of death advancing without anything as careful as tactics or strategy: they marched in a straight line, killing every living thing before them. Hainaut was lost, Hanno of Arwad had known in that moment. It could not be held against this, even though the Dead King might well have doomed himself with such a bold stroke. And yet, even as the dark-skinned man watched the inexorable crawl across the horizon, it was not the sights that had his attention. Or his worry.

Antigone had been *just a little too slow* to stop it.

It was not that providence had abandoned the Witch of the Woods, for it had not. She'd been awake and out in the hills when it happened, at Hanno's side as they discussed whether a raid to break up the army gathering north of the Cigelin Sisters was feasible. Antigone had been, relatively speaking, in the right place and at the right time. She *could* have prevented it, feasibly. Looking back, Hanno was certain of that. The opportunity had been provided. And yet Antigone's answering stroke, her attempt to inflict a flaw on the enemy ritual, had been just a little weak and too slow. She'd misjudged what was needed by a hair's breadth, which against the likes of the Dead King was more than enough to lose.

It'd been just slightly off, and that was what disturbed Hanno. The Witch of the Woods had been nudged towards a victory, yes, but Hanno feared that her enemy had not been nudged towards defeat. That the grand scheme of freezing an entire lake through a great ritual had not been marked with doom. And the implications of that... He struggled to even grasp the scope. Had the Gods Below chosen the King of Death as their champion, intervened to protect him from the promise reverses? And if they had, was today even the only time they would step in? He almost



shivered at the thought. The Dead King had been monstrous enough when he had been, if Catherine was to be believed, in disfavour with the Gods Below.

If he was the favourite son again, the war had become a manner of desperate that begged for a stronger word.

"The clouds are not receding, Lord White," the Mirror Knight said.

Many had taken to calling Hanno by the title of Prince White, and he no longer bade otherwise, but Christophe had never been one of them. The other man had been scalded by politics, the dark-skinned hero thought, and now avoided them like the plague. And it was a manner of politics to call Hanno any sort of prince, he would not pretend otherwise. A line was being drawn between here and Salia, all of the west deciding on which side it preferred to stand.

"They're expanding," Hanno softly agreed.

Dark clouds had appeared in the far distance, above what he knew bone-deep to be the Crown of the Dead without knowing how or why, and they had only been expanding since. A mile every hour, perhaps? It was hard to tell from so far away.

"I fear the Dead King means to cover the entire sky," the Mirror Knight said. "And that we've few means to stop him."

Hanno could only guess at the truth of that, but it rang true to him. It was a way to block out the sun, to wither crops and force soldiers to fight in the dark. It would spread fear, too, at the simple sight of it. How many would flee just for being convinced that the Gods were abandoning them all?

"Antigone will slow him down," Hanno replied.

Christophe turned green eyes on the once-White Knight, face grim beneath the helm.

"And how long will that hold?"

Hanno did not answer. Silence lingered.

"Hainaut is lost," he finally said. "We cannot hope to hold it. Let's head back to camp, Christophe, a message needs to be sent to General Abigail."

The Mirror Knight rose to his full height, sun glinting off the polished armour.

"And what will it say?" he curiously asked.

"That she is to retreat," Hanno of Arwad said. "As we will."

A line of defence would be left behind, but already he knew what must be done. Most of his army would go to the muster Cordelia Hasenbach had called for, the great host being assembled for a desperate last strike at the heart of the Enemy.

To Salia they would go, and after that only the Gods knew.

—

Henriette had done well, Prince Frederic Goethal thought as he beheld the walls of Courtial.

His cousin and heiress had been charged with preparing the defences of Brus while he fought abroad and she'd seen to the duty with skill. The last wave of Lycaonese refugees from Neustria was being ferried south into Segovia even as the evacuation of his own Bruseni began, emptying the north of his principality in anticipation of the war reaching it. And it soon would: Princess Rozala had sent word that Cleves was lost and she was retreating into Lyonis, which was the beginning of the end for the defence of that front. Unlike rocky, narrow Cleves the lands of Lyonis were fertile flatlands. There were no natural defences to use against the dead and too few fortresses to stem the tide.

It was only a matter of time until the northeast of Brus began to see raids from the Enemy, probing the defences, and it already was from the northwest. The retreat from the Morgentor had been a march through nightmares, Neustria falling apart around them as the dead butchered thousands and swelled their armies with the slaughter, but the armies had made it. Frederic had risked a raid against a Crab to buy the army time to pull ahead of the tireless armies of the Dead King, but Otto had decided to blithely walk back his agreement and pull him out of the fire at the last moment. It'd been a miracle they'd made it back, much less losing as few men as they had.

But now here they were, their rearguard even now making its way through the hidden paths that led through the great marshlands to the northwest of the principality. Frederic himself had ridden with the van, as was his preference, and that'd led him to the low hill where he'd reined in his charge. In the distance the walls of Courtial, the great fortress the predecessors of the House of Goethal had raised at the edge of the swamps, rose in pale stone. There was a walled city at the foot of the fortress, a mere four thousand souls or so, but that made it the largest gathering of people in the region by far. It was why Frederic had decided on Courtial as a supply base, knowing that a host as large as his own would need the spare hands.

Of the nearly one hundred thousand soldiers that had once stood on the walls of the Morgentor only thirty-seven thousand had made it south, and of these only twenty thousand would keep marching

south. Brus' borders could not be held with only the garrisons now defending them, even if Henriette had moved Heavens and Hells to swell those ranks. Twenty thousand would have to be enough when he answered the First Prince's call to muster. *It will have to be enough*, Frederic thought, *for there are no more men to spare*. The thought was grim but no less true for it. Passing a tired hand through his hair – the helm had ridden tight against a ribbon, tugging at it – the Kingfisher Prince allowed himself a short moment of peace.

To feel the wet wind coming from the marshes, enjoy the sight of the distant green of the rolling plains to the south. It had been years since he was last in the land of his birth. He almost felt a stranger to it.

The peace was ended by the sound of approaching hooves. Frederic felt his retinue stir at the bottom of the hill, but none called a warning. A friend, then, and not unexpected. It was not long before a dozen heavy horses barded in steel joined his retinue below, parting to allow through their prince: Otto Reitzenberg of Bremen, who men called Redcrown. Perhaps the finest friend Frederic had ever made, the man who had saved his life more times than he had fingers to count. Otto deftly guided his charger up the slope, slowing when they became of a height.

The Prince of Bremen was dark-haired and dour, with that unfortunate Reitzenberg nose and a chipped tooth he'd never gotten around to getting fixed, but you would not have known it from the way his people reacted to him. Cordelia Hasenbach was still held in high esteem among the Lycaonese, but she had not fought with her people – not the way Otto Redcrown had. When word had come that Mathilda Greensteel and the Iron Prince had died in Hainaut, the prince of Bremen had become the living banner of the northerners. So long as he stood, they would not falter. Frederic much feared what would happen were he slain, and not only because it would feel as if half his soul were lost.

"Otto," the Kingfisher Prince lazily said. "Come to see the sights?"

"Not a mountain to be found," Otto grunted. "It is troubling, Frederic. Like walking around with the back of your trousers missing."

Frederic laughed. Otto had never set foot out of the Lycaonese principalities before the war, and rarely out of his native Bremen. This was the furthest he'd even been from home. A home now little more than ashes and undead.

"I'm glad you will be able to see the plains before the war reaches them," the Prince of Brus said. "It is not the right season for the flower fields, but-"

There was a sound like a scream, if the world itself could scream. Frederic froze in surprise, but a heartbeat later his sword had cleared the scabbard. It was not only him who'd heard the noise, he saw, for Otto and both their escorts were arming themselves. The scream died as suddenly as it had come, but it left behind thick unease.

"That did not come from the swamps," the Kingfisher Prince decided.

"Heaven's ward," Otto quietly said.

Frederic followed his friend's gaze, across the distance and all the way to the pale walls of Courtial. At first he thought it was a heat haze, improbable as it would be, but it was not. The stone was twisting and slithering, spinning out in strands. All of the madness orbited a single form, a great eye of sickly green light set in a pulsing haze of purple flames.

"Demon," Frederic rasped out, coldly furious. "The Dead King seeks to destroy the city before we can hold it. I will not suffer it."

He cast a look at his riders.

"Raise the banner," the Kingfisher Prince ordered. "Lord Gontrand, you will ride in haste for priests and mages. There is no time to-"

The world screamed again, wracked in pain. There was a splash of murky darkness in the heart of the fortified city. Within a heartbeat, screaming began. Terror, Frederic recognized. They were screams of utter terror. His Name flared in protection, burning away the sliver of corruption carried by the distant sounds.

"You will need the Stained Sister and the Astrologer," Otto evenly said. "It is nothing but throwing away lives otherwise."

Frederic bit his lip until it bled, but curtly nodded. Getting himself killed would help no one, besides – the world began to scream again. Not the city, this time. In the distance, the green rolling plains to the south lit up with red. Fire was spreading through air and ground alike, like baleful tendrils. There was another scream.

And another.

Another.

Another.

This, the Kingfisher Prince dimly realized, was no longer a war. It was an extermination.

—

It was madness, Roland thought. Impossible.

He was in Aisne, looking into the rumour a Revenant had been seen. There was all of Brabant between him and the fronts. Aisne was not safe, for nowhere was safe in these dark times, but the principality had been spared the swords of the Dead King. Even after the Carrion Lord's depredations during the Tenth Crusade, the land here remained some of the finest in the principate: great golden plains as far as the eye could see, vineyards and orchards and merry streams. These were the heartlands of the Principate, only Cantal and Iserre fancied as richer in harvests.

And now Rogue Sorcerer was watching that same harvest die.

Entire swaths of the sunny blue sky above had broken like panes of glass, sights from the eerie horizons of Arcadia shown through the rifts, and great stones had fallen down. One through every rift, and though they fell without regard to where they might land Roland did not think that this was a mere bombardment. He hurried the closest fallen stone, riding a horse half to death, and found that death had arrived long before he could. The stone, a massive thing of granite the height and width of a dozen men, had shattered a barn that mercifully looked like it'd been abandoned. But it was not the stone that struck fear in him.

Out of small holes in granite, almost like pores, small critters were pouring out. Hardly any larger than crickets, they had a glint of copper them in the glare of the sun as they spread out like a cursed plague. They fanned out like a curtain and, instead of any sort of terrible curse, they simply spoiled all they touched. Like rippled going through the field before him, Roland watched with muted horror as in a matter of moments they made half a mile's worth of grain uneatable. Half-rotten, perhaps even poisonous. Gathering himself he pulled at the most destructive of magics within him, spraying flame and whipping up a storm of it.

Thousands of the undead critters died in moments, leaving him panting and already half spent. There were still a few out there that he could see and he took the time to clear them out, but his mind was already awl at the implications.

"This will kill us all," Roland de Beaumaraais whispered.

How many of the stones had fallen? At least six here in Aisne, and the Dead King would have done much the same across all the lands that serves as the breadbasket of Procer. Cantal, Iserre, perhaps even as far west as Aequitan. He was killing the infestation here, but how many of these abominations would land days of travel away from anyone who might end them? The great stone pulsed with power, but the Rogue Sorcerer snarled in rage and snapped his wrist towards it.

## **"Confiscate."**

The magic invested in it was foul, handling it felt like licking pestilence, but even as the stone went inert Roland forced himself to study the sorcery. It had been meant, he decided, to release another swarm. It had been gathering power from ambient sorcery ever since unleashing the first. Likely the stone itself was being converted into the foul critters and the spell would run out when there was no longer enough granite to sustain the enchantments. *Four, five swarms*, he guessed. And, even as his heart clenched and his blood turned to ice, Roland de Beaumaraais corrected his words.

"This *has* killed us all," the Rogue Sorcerer whispered.

Procer did not know it yet, might not for days or even weeks, but it was starving.

—

Princess Rozala watched in mute horror as the wave washed over the rampart, sweeping men and engines away in a murderous crash.

She'd thought they had longer, that though the defensive line around Peroulet was good as fallen the city itself might hold a while longer. That it might slow down the advance of the Enemy before the army holding it was forced to retreat through the Twilight Ways into Lyonis. And was she not right to hope? The Dead King had thrown devils at these walls, and when that failed a pair of demons, but they had held. Gods, it had cost them but they had held and sent the beasts screaming back into the Hells. They'd tied down an army a hundred thousand strong by keeping the city, buying time for walls to be raised to their south, and even as the dead assaulted the walls day and night the defenders held. Exhausted and bleeding, but so very proud. Had they not held against the Enemy's worst?

So the Dead King began to drown them all.

It was said that the Black Queen's most fearsome spell — the Deluge, singers called it — had been used against her in Hainaut, but Rozala had not thought her own host at risk. The Enemy had never used it elsewhere, perhaps out of fear that he would be caught and the spell would be turned against him. Whatever the truth of it, such restraint was gone: a great gate had been opened at ground height facing the gates of Peroulet and within moments the blast of water had smashed them down. Water began pouring into the city, tipping over soldiers and horses, breaking houses. It had not stopped there. Another two gates were opened on the city's flanks, higher up. The tides there were now sweeping over the ramparts, crushing whatever men had manned them.

Rozala had been commanding from the summit of the keep at the heart of the city, as she liked the vantage, but now she was being forced to watch the city drown and her army with it.

"Louis," she said, forcing herself to be calm. "The outer city is lost. Order our priests to form shields across the streets from the height of..."

She paused, searching through her memory.

"Therrien Avenue," the Princess of Aquitan finished.

"That's abandoning a third of the city, Rozala," her husband quietly said. "The one where most of our soldiers are."

"It is either that or losing all of it," she evenly replied. "Send the order, along with that of general retreat."

The moment they had lost the walls they'd lost the siege. All she could do now was salvage all she could of the army and pray it was enough. Louis Rohanon grimaced, but did not argue. He'd been in this war just as long as she had, he too knew the looks of a city lost.

"It will be done," he promised, then hesitated.

She smiled, laying his hand on her belly. It had swollen, but she was still months away from birth according to the priests.

"Go," Rozala ordered. "We'll live through it, all three of us."

He laid a kiss on her hand and left. The princess avoided the amused gazes of her personal guard as her husband and secretary left. She had never been much of a romantic herself, as they well knew, but she did appreciate her husband's continued tenderness. It was terribly Alamans, but it'd grown on her. Shaking off the thought, Rozala brought up her Baalite eye again and continued to preside over what was already promising to be one of the greatest defeats of her career as a general. The battle was lost, there was no denying that, but she must learn all she could of the Enemy's tricks before her army retreated.

The Dead King was in fine form today, it seemed. The water pouring out of the gates had not stopped, filling the outer city so much it was not spilling over the walls and the shields raised by priests and mages were buckling under the weight. It was not the end of it, though. Great war engines not unlike oversized ballistae had been dragged to the fore of the undead army outside the city, a dozen of them, and bombardment began unceremoniously. The projectiles they shot arced upwards, above the shields her people had raised, and tore through the hasty attempts by her last spare mages to bounce them off. Great monoliths of obsidian

tore into the paved roads, cleaving through the stone, and began pulsing with sorcery.

"All Named on the monoliths," Rozala ordered. "The water was merely a strike, these are the killing stroke."

The messenger went off at a run, but few things were faster than sorcery. Rozala had read the reports of the Black Queen's battle at Lauzon's Hollow and she recalled mention of pillars of black stone with a similar look, but the difference in size was stark. No mere pillars, these: they were large enough that the war engines that shot them were made of steel and large as houses. The effect, though, seemed to be similar from the description she had read. A pulse of crackling lightning slew all men in range, and then a few heartbeats later a second pulse raised them from the dead. The size, Rozala decided, was a mere consequence of the power of the cursed things having been increased. It was still fundamentally the same trick.

Cold comfort, when she saw near a thousand soldiers die in the first pulse.

Practically speaking an enemy bridgehead had been established behind her lines and, more importantly, her shields. If the dead began killing priests... If Louis were here, with his head for numbers he might hazard a guess at the strength that the great volumes of water held back by the shields might bring to bear. Rozala did not have that particular gift, though she knew enough to suspect it would be a merciless slaughter.

"Full retreat," Princess Rozala ordered, the words like ashes in her mouth. "All forces are to immediately begin making their way towards Gueridon Plaza. The wayfarer mages are to open the gates into the Twilight Ways."

Maybe half her army would make it out of the city, if she was lucky, and this did not seem like a day for luck. Peroulet had held for weeks only to now fall in hours, and deep down Rozala was beginning to wonder if she'd not simply been allowed to remain here for some deeper purpose. She grit her teeth, putting away the Baalite eye. It did not matter. There was only one place left for her army to retreat to.

Salia, where Cordelia Hasenbach had called for a great muster.

—

After Brus fell, it was finished.

It had taken the Dead King years to take the Lycaonese principalities, and even Neustria's fall had come mere months ago, but now it seemed as if the Enemy was no longer restraining himself. The principality of Brus still stood in the sense that



most of its lands were intact and over half of its people remained, but as a state it was finished. All its major cities had been struck by demons and only the most heavily warded of border fortresses still stood, meaning that Prince Frederic now ruled over farmland being overrun and a panicked mass of refugees.

Lyonis was being swept through, its defences overrun, and now that the White Knight had withdrawn from Hainaut the lands it had defended were beginning to break as well. Prince Ariel of Arans was negotiating with the regent of Callow for his people to be allowed across the Stairway, having been refused by the Prince of Bayeux to his south, and the Brabantine refugees that Cordelia had not welcomed into Salia had armed themselves so they could force their way into Aisne even through a closed border. The moment word of it all had spread, the First Prince of Procer had lost the last power she held over the southern Principate.

No royalty south of Creusens still answered her letters, save those who had invited her to flee to their realm and continue her rule under their protection. Cordelia had declined the offer, even when made by those who genuinely meant the words. Her duty was in Salia. She had left her own Rhenia to burn for that duty and she would not forsake it now. She could feel it in the air, the way that all the winds were blowing towards the capital. The last gasp of Procer would be exhaled here, in the same city where it had been founded centuries ago. Agnes had agreed, though the predictions she shared afterwards were troubling.

But Cordelia Hasenbach would not go gently into the night, and so she had prepared.

Salia could not be evacuated. Even if her increasingly tenuous hold on the city could be used to bend the people that way, there was simply nowhere for them to go. With the refugees pouring in from the north, there were likely now as many people in Salia and its surrounding towns as in all of Brus. If the people were dispersed in every direction most would die from lack of means, and if they remained together they would be a crushing burden to whichever principality they fled to. Cordelia, much as the thought disgusted her, knew that armies would be mobilized to massacre them before they crossed the border if need be.

A decade ago that would have been unthinkable, but after the Great War and the brutality of the conflict with the Dead King? Desperation would make for ugly deeds.

And so Salia must stand, lest Cordelia condemn hundreds of thousands to death. Her duty decided, she had set to prepare the defence and even what would come after. Armies would gather to the capital so that they might set out against Keter, but those armies would need food and steel and supplies. She bargained and begged and confiscated – stole with the fig leaf of law – to

scrap together all she could, and still Agnes told her that doom was coming. The armies would not be there in time. The Dead King would strike first. And so the First Prince of Procer turned to the sole recourse left to her.

She sent all villains east into Aisne and sent Agnes away from the city, where her sight would be needed, then dismissed her servants and headed towards the Chamber of Assembly.

The seat of the Highest Assembly had little changed since the day Clothor Merovins had been elected as the founding First Prince of Procer. In a city that every ruler wanted to grace with another fresh thing of beauty, another layer of glamour and glory, the ancient hall remained untouched. Walls of whitewashed limestone, rafters of ancient creaking oak and that faint smell of wood smoke come from the fire that had caught during the second Liturgical War. In a city heavily laden with gold and marble and jewels, it was a stark and bare place – save for the twenty-four thrones that filled it. Twenty-three on the ground, one for each principality, and one for the First Prince on the dais above.

Cordelia sat on Clothor Merovins' old throne and close her eyes. She could feel the grey granite beneath her, polished by a river but otherwise unadorned, and she set her palm against the coolness of it. In a way she had never been close to that seat, she mused. Cordelia too had been worn to smoothness, stripped of all her affectations. The fair-haired princess smiled at the thought, then in the pale light of the single lantern lit she waited in silence. It would come soon, Agnes had told her as much, and it would come here. And when her answer was given, well, she would learn something as well.

She was half asleep when the scream sounded, but ice ran through her blood and she was wide awake before the roof atop her was ripped off. Cordelia looked up at the night sky, the stars and the half-moon, but they were marred by a great gate spewing out winged abominations. A Hellgate. That was the Dead King's bow, then, a Hellgate above the very beating heart of the Principate. Yet there was more. Ugly, unspeakable things that came creeping through the dark. That bent wood as if it were water and made of tiles wriggling snakes. How many were there? She could not tell, in the dark, but there had to be more than one.

It was a great winged devil that dared to first enter the Chamber, landing in a crouch before her. Shaped like a horned man, though broader than any man she had met, and covered with thick dark fur. Bestial and with a mouth full of fangs that it dared to grin at her with. She leaned forward, her dress of Rhenian blue pulling tight on her shoulders.

"Can you hear me, Dead King?" Cordelia asked.

The creature milled uneasily, then stilled.

"In a manner of speaking," it replied, its voice not its own.

"Ah, I had hoped you would," the First Prince of Procer smiled.

"You struggled mightily," the Dead King said. "But there is no turning back the inexorable."

"It may well be that we will fall," the First Prince acknowledged. "But until then, Trismegistus King, do not forget one thing."

She smiled, cold and hard and with every once of scorn every Hasenbach had ever felt for the old monster.

"This is Procer," she hissed. "You tread here at your peril."

Pale light washed over them all.

An eternity passed. The Light had seared Cordelia's skin but left her strangely invigorated, and when she opened her eyes again she found... nothing. Not before her, not in the sky above, not anywhere at all. There was only Salia and her people. The ealamal had worked as the priests as sworn it would, scouring all of the principality from the Dead King and his works. It had been weakened, they told her, both in stringency and in scope. Power had been limited and been made less discriminating. Cordelia had still likely killed a hundreds if not thousands of people in Salia through that order, she did not delude herself otherwise. People who had not been tried, been judged under the law.

They had only been judged as taints on Creation by the Choir of Judgement even through all the priests had done to force mercy onto that judgement. No Damned could have hoped to survive were they present, which was why Cordelia had sent them to Aisne, for in the eyes of the Seraphim villains were scarcely better than devils or demons.

Even though there was a sliver of guilt at the deaths she had ensured, Cordelia knew that the fate her decision had spared Salia would have been incomparable. And, deep down, a part of her felt deeply vindicated. Many had tried to warn her off the angel's corpse, called it madness or stupidity. Yet it had just saved every soul within the borders of Salia, and likely would again. Alone in the silent hall where the princes and princesses of Procer ruled but now she alone sat with silence for sole company, Cordelia Hasenbach looked up through the torn roof at the night sky. The pale stars set against the darkness, like candle lights never more than a breath away from being snuffed.

The Lycaonese princess raised a hand, as if to pluck them from the sky, and smiled.

"One more night to live," Cordelia told them. "Dawn has not yet failed."

She would win her people as many nights as she could, whatever the cost.

## Chapter 27: Recoil

*"He is never lost who has no home."*

– Orc saying

Bayeux had a reputation as one of the most beautiful principalities in Procer.

The western parts of it fed into the great fertile plains that were the heartlands of the Principate, but the eastern stretch was vividly green. It was because of the Whitecaps, I'd read, as the ice on the slopes of the great mountains melted come spring and fed a myriad of small rivers. It was all valleys and hills, greenery shining like emeralds. Even now that the Dead King's grasp had reached as far as mere miles away from the border of Bayeux, the land had lost none of its beauty. There was probably a turn of phrase to be squeezed out of that, something about how there could be beauty even as the world darkened. My fingers clenched. Unfortunately, I'd used too many of those platitudes to still put in stock in them.

So instead I wrenched my eyes away from the distant beauty of the valleys and put my attention where it belonged. Which happened to be a tall silver mirror bordered by runes, whose surface shimmered for an instant before revealing a still eerily beautiful woman. Alaya of Satus' beauty had not been entirely an artifice or the result of her Name. Even stripped of both and touched with the marks of aging for the first time since I'd known her – small wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, her skin being less than perfect – she remained perhaps the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. It did nothing for me. What I felt for her was hatred's tired cousin, and it swallowed too much ground for anything else to ever be able to grow there.

"Report," I flatly ordered.

Standing at my side, High Lady Abreha shuffled slightly on her feet. As always, she was straddling the line between being glad that I was able to order the once-empress and discomfort at the leader of Praes being ordered by anyone at all. Abreha was not such a complicated woman, once you learned to ignore the labyrinthine thirst for schemes and utterly amoral ambition.

"Your Excellency," Chancellor Alaya of – well, that was still being debated – greeted me, bowing her head. "The third wave will

be setting out earlier than we had planned. Marshal Nim's efforts to reassemble the Legions have proved successful beyond our most optimistic estimates."

I kept my breath steady. Every week, every cursed fucking week, we found another way that my father had played us. The Battle of Kala had ruined the Legions of Terror, broken their spirit, but it'd also kept the soldiers out of the significantly more brutal throwdown in Ater. There had been masses of disaffected soldiers for the Black Knight to recruit under her new banner. That wasn't even entirely a metaphor, since the old banner of the Dread Empire had been the Tower in black on crimson.

"They'll need to set out directly for Keter," I said. "I've been in contact with the First Prince and the situation on the ground over here is... not promising."

Something of an understatement, that. The Dead King had stopped pulling his punches, unveiling his full arsenal of horrors. The fronts that'd held him back for almost three years had been torn through like wet parchment in a matter of hours and Procer had effectively collapsed as a nation within two days. The only thing slowing down Keter's armies was the sheer amount of land being set aflame, it was a full retreat everywhere. Only in Salia was there a semblance of safety and considering how Cordelia was managing that I had somewhat mixed feelings about it.

"How bad?" Chancellor Alaya quietly asked.

"Militarily, Procer is done," I frankly replied. "The generals did the smart thing and pulled back their armies to Salia to preserve forces for the assault on Keter, but that was at the cost of effectively surrendering the country. There's not a force left north of Iserre that will be more than an afternoon's work for the dead."

She nodded, once and sharply.

"I will accelerate the preparations as best I can," Chancellor Alaya promised. "I have news from the Free Cities that I suspect have outpaced the reports from the Jacks."

"I'm listening."

"Empress Basilia took the armies of the League into the Twilight Ways a month past," she said. "For war against Keter, she claims. They've been seen in Salamans since, but I could not obtain more. The Eyes have increasingly large gaps."

"Let's hope she lives up to her letters, then," I grunted.

Basilia had been sending us – myself and the First Prince – those regularly until she marched out, to me as her former patron and

to Cordelia has a fellow ruler. Most of it was just assurances of friendship and peace, but she'd also been promising to bring the armies of the League into the war. Didn't sound promising for her to have emerged in Salamans, considering half the southern princes were considering petition for entry into the League, but I'd reserve judgement for now.

"Indeed," Chancellor Alaya mildly replied. "May I ask as to the progress of the second wave?"

I'd been part of the first wave out of Praes. Gone from Ater before they even burned my father. Pressed for time, I'd claimed, and Procer was falling apart. *Fleeing*, my mind had called it, and it was the truer of the two. I'd taken with me the armies I'd brought and the vanguard of the Praesi reinforcements, a few thousand former household troops with cabals of diabolists and the first few... assets we'd raised after the dust settled in Ater. All of them led by High Lady Abreha. The second wave had set out two week later, the rest of the household troops – all currently auxiliaries in the Legions of Terror – and a ninety-two thousand orc warriors. The full muster of the Clans, led by their Warlord.

"High Lady Abreha has been handling communications with them," I said, flicking a glance at her.

Abreha cleared her throat, an amusing affectation considering she no longer needed to breathe. Of all the undead creations I had made of Night, she was by far the most lifelike. Sometimes I even forgot she was dead.

"Their pace has been steady and the resupply in Laure did not slow them down," High Lady Abreha said. "Duchess Kegan had the cattle ready to join the horde. High Lord Sargon swears that the Old Mothers will last until the offensive against Keter."

"Good news," Chancellor Alaya said. "If the armies around Salia are properly arrayed for war, it might be possible to begin the march north within days of the second wave arriving."

"I'll not count the cat skinned until I wear the skin," I snorted. "Proceran armies are terrible at handling supplies and Hasenbach can only fit so many miracles up her sleeves. I'm still awe at the quantity of grain and feed she's put together."

She must have emptied half the granaries in the Principate for it, which would have been impressive even if half the realm *hadn't* already seceded in all but name – and sometimes not even that.

"One hopes that the threat of annihilation will inspire unexpected competence," Chancellor Alaya said, a hint of asperity to her tone.

I doubted it. Fear sometimes made people sharper, pushed them beyond their limits, but most of the time it just made them sloppy and stupid. Juniper and I were already counting on two weeks stuck near Salia after the second wave joined us.

"We'll see," I replied, then my gaze hardened. "So what's this I hear about changes to the electorate?"

The Chancellor of Nobody Could Agree On What Yet dipped her head.

"The Green Stretch has been pushing for a vote of its own instead of being considered a joint territory with Ater, but there have been disagreements," she replied. "The argument was made that procedurally speaking an even number of votes might lead to deadlock, which led others to argue the Clans should be granted a second vote."

Which the High Seats would find unacceptable. Leaving what was effectively two votes in goblin hands – one for the Eyries and one for Foramen – was acceptable because Foramen still had a population that was human in majority and there was no guarantee Wither's dynasty would keep its seat, but if the Clans got a second vote the greenskins would become a power bloc as powerful as the Soninke. Throw in another vote for the Green Stretch into this and the High Seats in human hands would make up only five of the eleven votes choosing the Chancellor of Praes.

"I won't ride your back about this," I said, "but I shouldn't need to tell you that if this comes to blows my patience is more than spent."

"I will not," the once-empress calmly told me. "Negotiations are ongoing, but there is progress. Alternatives for tiebreaking are being considered."

I sighed and let it go. I had neither the time nor the inclination to look over her shoulder while preparing for a campaign halfway across the continent. I'd have to *trust* that she knew what she was doing.

"It might be of interest to you that majority vote has narrowed down the name of our nation to either the 'Confederation of Praes' or the 'Republic of Praes'," Chancellor Alaya continued, changing the subject.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Republic?" I skeptically asked.

"There have been other republics than Bellerophon," the Chancellor replied. "Though I lean towards Confederation myself, should the Grey Eyries be convinced to relinquish that name themselves in favour of another."

I supposed it *would* be a tad awkward for the Confederation of the Grey Eyries to be a member-state of the Confederation of Praes.

"So long as it is not the League of Praes," High Lady Abreha fervently said. "Dakarai must have been drunk when he suggested it."

I thought, somewhat unkindly, that it was a bit much for the High Seats to look down at the League's squabbling when the Dread Empire had managed at least as many civil wars while claiming to be a single state instead of a loose coalition.

"A conversation for another day," I curtly said. "I believe we're finished here, Chancellor, unless you have anything else to bring up."

Alaya of Satus inclined her head respectfully.

"I will be arriving with the third wave," she said. "Arrangements were made."

My eyes narrowed, but I did not contradict her. I was not sure whether I was angry she was insisting on risking the life my father had died to preserve or pleased that for once the former empress would be getting a closer look at what a real war looked like. It was a different beast, when you weren't looking at it from atop your tower.

"Then we will meet beneath the walls of Keter," I said. "I'll be expecting your report next week at the same hour."

I met her eyes.

"Chancellor."

"Your Excellency," she replied, dipping down in deference.

The formal address that had been adopted for the Name of Warden of the East in Praes was the last thing she spoke before the silver mirror dimmed. I rolled my shoulder, cracking it. My limbs always felt sore these days. From too much twisting around as I slept, I figured. I'd not been sleeping well since... I'd not been sleeping well, was all.

I could not, would not look back. The moment I did the pit awaited.

"Our confederation is beginning well enough," High Lady Abreha mused. "To think I'd see the day the Dread Empire was replaced."

I eyed her skeptically, hiding my amusement at the way she'd avoided the more common turn of phrase of 'living to see the day'.



"It will change," I said. "It'll have to. Power's being pulled in too many directions."

I was personally of the opinion that the High Seats would start by acting as I was sure my father had thought they would, by clashing against each other and bribing the greenskin and Ater votes with positive reforms, but it wouldn't last forever. At some point they'd either close ranks and try to keep the office within their families – which I couldn't see working long, given how often their dynastic interests were at odds – or they'd turn to other means to take power. That'd lead to war, one I wasn't sure the High Seats would be able to win, and in the vacuum after that defeat my bet was that the Legions of Terror would step in. Nim was zealously apolitical, but how many of her successors would be?

Maybe if she stuck around long enough preserving the sanctity of the elections would become part of the story of the Black Knight, but I wouldn't hold my breath. Besides, the Intercessor had put an end to that sort of thing. Forever or for now I could not know, and so I'd set Hierophant to the task of finding out.

"There will be adjustments," Abreha dismissed, "but the skeleton will hold. It answers a need."

"And what would that be?" I asked.

I wasn't even being snippy. Abreha Mirembé was a reprehensible excuse for a human being, but she'd stood near the apex of Praesi politics for decades. Her understanding of the Wasteland was equalled by few and surpassed by fewer. I belonged to neither category.

"Seizing the Tower by force was *costly*, Your Excellency," the undead aristocrat said. "In soldiers, in coin, in contracts called upon. And it was ever a risky enterprise, even when one's family stood strongly behind them. Holding the Tower was even more difficult: most tyrants were part of the Dark Council or at least the imperial court before they climbed the Tower. Ater has been the grave of many a High Lord."

"So you'll stick with the votes because they're cheaper than war," I skeptically said.

"Because eight years is not so long a time to wait," High Lady Abreha smiled, baring yellow teeth. "Why raise an illegal army and risk battles and ruination when the coming election is a better way to usurp rule from your rival? No longer are we ruled until death, Your Excellency, and we live longer than lesser breeds. We have years enough that we can afford patience."

I paused, forced myself to consider that. I'd noticed, when facing Sargon Sahelian in Wolof, that the great families of Praes

tended to think over long spans. That when a High Lord could not climb the Tower, they turned instead to strengthening their dynasty. This system, with the votes, it played on that an instinct. Why should you rush into a hasty war when waiting a mere twenty years might see you elected Chancellor? Better to bide your time, forge your alliances and save up for the right bribes. You'd get your eight years, and without having risked your family. It was a system that would weed out the reckless, I realized.

Ensure the same kind of people who'd once claimed the Tower through orgies of bloodletting would never end up anywhere near the rule of Praes.

"The Carrion Lord was a vicious little shit," Abreha said. "But brilliant too, in his own twisted way. He understood the old families better than we ever knew."

I sighed. I was still unconvinced that this would not eventually turn into military rule by the Legions, but then I wasn't sure that wouldn't also be part of plan. The thought might well have appealed to him.

"We'll see," I finally said.

"They will be interesting times," the undead noble. "Should we make it through the end of the world, anyhow."

"How very hopeful, High Lady Abreha," I drily said.

"That is-"

She was interrupted by a sound I was unfortunately familiar with: a detonation. It was easy enough to tell where it was coming from. We were standing on the outskirts of a nameless village, atop a flat slope that'd been judged a good place for receiving the Chancellor's report, and from up here I could see a plume of smoke coming up from a large barn. Broad and dry and in good state, it was where Masego had set up for the half-day we would be spending in Creation before rejoining my army in the Twilight Ways. He'd had tests to run, he said. My heart clenched. Gods, let him not have gotten hurt. Already I had... my fingers clenched around a knife I was not holding.

*Do not look back, I ordered myself. Else the pit awaits.*

Masego would be fine. He wasn't a fool, he'd have taken precautions before attempting anything risky. I still parted ways with High Lady Abreha after only cursory courtesies and hurried limped my way down, my personal guard falling in around me. The village was little more than a hole in the ground with dusty streets between the two abandoned shops and handful of houses that made it up, so there was nowhere to get lost. I found

Apprentice outside the barn and on her knees when I got there, coughing profusely. A glance through the open door revealed the shape of a tall man in dark robes moving around, which released a knot in my stomach.

I stopped to speak with Sapan, whose coughing had turned into wheezes.

"You all right, kid?" I asked.

"Fine, Your Majesty," she rasped out. "I just swallowed a mouthful of Light."

I blinked, then cocked to the side.

"And it didn't burn you?" I carefully asked.

"Scalded," Sapan admitted. "It will teach me to always double-layer my shields."

"Always a good idea," I sagely agreed.

I patted her shoulder comfortingly, satisfied she was in no danger, and entered the barn. Immediately my steps stuttered, and not because of the limp. I'd not been able to see it from up the hill, but something a blown a ring hole right through the barn's ceiling. By the looks of the burns around the ring, had to be Light or something like it.

"Tell me," I said, "that it wasn't the artefact that made this mess."

Hierophant was leaning over a scorched stone table that'd survived the explosion and on which rested a leather-bound book. Half the barn was filled with various instruments and the enchanted trinkets he'd used to measure emanations back in the Arsenal, and a few of the former had been brought to the stone table. He was handling it with a pair of pincers, carefully turning the pages as he inspected them.

"I could," Hierophant noted. "But you always get inexplicably irritated when you ask me to lie to you and I do."

I sighed.

"Yes," he happily said. "Just like that."

"Tell me it's not broken at least," I said.

I limped deeper into the barn, making my way to his side.

"I do not believe that a single means at my disposal would be able to so much as notch the binding of the Book," Hierophant said, sounding fascinated.

I narrowed my eyes at his back. I'd felt the capitalization in that.

"We're not calling it that," I said.

"It's an appropriate and endearing name," Zeze insisted. "I have this on good authority."

"You mean Indrani," I said, unimpressed.

"I have this on authority," Zeze conceded.

My lips twitched, but slagging on Archer wouldn't be enough to win me over.

"It'd be blasphemy," I reminded him. "And we're already treading pretty narrowly there considering we've stolen all the Good stories of Calernia and made a book of them."

"I did that," Masego objected. "Which means I get to name it. It's the Book of Some Things."

Because calling the godsdamned thing a joke about the Book of All Things was going to go *great* with the Procerans. I could already feel the migraine in my future reaching backwards to me now, having grown so catastrophically large it had shattered the very laws of time.

"We can discuss it later," I lied.

He turned to glare at me, which – wait what?

"Masego," I said with forced calm, "what the Hells happened to your eye?"

Not only was his usual black eye cloth gone, one of the glass eyes he'd earned when transitioning into Hierophant was gone. I would ask *where*, but the bloody blackened mess that'd been made out of his empty eye socket answered the question well enough. The other eye had survived, but the glimmers of Summer sunlight in the glass had noticeably dimmed.

"Ah," Hierophant said, sounding somewhat embarrassed. "That."

I took his chin in hand and moved him around to get a better look at the wound. Shallow stuff. I frowned.

"Did you enchant the inside of your eye socket?" I asked.

"Of course not," he replied, sounding offended. "Enchantments laid into flesh are notoriously imprecise and prone to mutation."

His chin was released. I waited, staring at him expectantly.

"I inserted chips of bone into the flesh, which I then enchanted," Masego proudly told me. "In anticipation of an eventuality just like this one."

Yeah, there it was. He looked at me, eyebrow cocked.

"You may praise my foresight now," he encouraged.

"New rule," I said. "Before you stick stuff in yourself and enchant it, ask someone about it."

"I asked Akua when designing the enchantments last year," he informed me. "She was quite helpful. Is she our friend again now, while I remember to ask? I was never quite clear on whether we are meant to despise her or not."

"I'm changing the rule to asking *me*," I noted. "If I'm not there you should ask-"

I swallowed the answer. He was not here, he'd left me. *Do not look back*, I ordered myself. *Else the pit awaits*.

"-Vivienne," I finished. "And for Akua, use your judgement. You don't have to hate her if you don't want to."

"I don't," Masego informed me. "Useful to know, thank you."

"Speaking of useful," I said, forcing this back to the here and now. "Am I to assume you got something useful out of the hole in the ceiling?"

"That is how I lost the eye," Hierophant admitted. "It appears the Gods Above were disinclined to allow me to peer too closely at their work. They seemed quite cross."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Well, at least you didn't get smote," I forced out. "What did you learn?"

"Several things," he noted. "The first is that the Intercessor still lives."

I cursed in Kharsum. I'd figured she did, even after losing the stories, but it was not pleasant to have my suspicions confirmed.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"The readings I have of the artefact leaving dormancy allowed me to establish that they shouldn't have interfered with the secondary enchantment we laid on the Spike," Masego said.

I frowned at him. The silver harpoon he'd used in Ater, the Spike, had been meant to do exactly two things. Extract an aspect

from the Bard using the same principles that Zeze had used to cut out my corrupted aspect in Marchford all those years ago, and then ensure that even if the Bard died she would not escape. Our solution to her disappearing at every time she bought it had been, well, necromancy. If she died with the Spike in her, she was supposed to be raised from the dead immediately. Only the enchantment had failed, because when she'd bit off her tongue she'd disappeared.

"The enchantment failed, though," I reminded him.

"Not because of interference from the process of extraction, as I had originally believed," Hierophant said. "Which has fascinating implications, Catherine, because it means the necromancy was beaten out by a stronger will."

"So she refused real hard to become undead?" I asked.

"I mean will in the magical sense," Masego clarified.

Ah, so the same exercise of willpower that allowed a mage to use magic. The Trismegistan theory of magic preached that usurpation was the essence of sorcery, that a mage was stealing dominion over the laws of Creation whenever they used magic. Which meant he was implying a stronger mage than him had fought the enchantment.

"She can't do magic," I frowned. "I'm nearly certain about that."

"There are always at least two will when magic is used, Catherine," Hierophant reminded me.

I blinked.

"You mean *Creation*?" I hissed.

"I believe it is a creational law that the Intercessor cannot die," Masego agreed. "Only conflict with a fundamental law would be able to kill her, should this theory be correct."

Which meant sorcery wouldn't do it, and neither should Names. Not Light or Night either. Fundamental laws were supposedly laws that applied to even the Gods, things like 'something cannot come from nothing' and the like, but those were more like limits. Not the kind of law you could exploit.

"Fuck," I said. "That complicates things."

I'd thought of stripping stories from her as the first step to getting her head on a plate, but that no longer looked feasible. I was going to need a new way to deal with the Wandering Bard.

"Containment might be a more realistic solution," Zeze suggested.

"We're already planning that with the Dead King," I said. "I'm not comfortable with the number of ancient evils we're going to be shoving into lamps. At the very least, at this rate we'll run out of lamps."

"I imagine given long enough I will be able to find a way to kill her," Hierophant mused. "It is only a matter of being thorough."

The mildness of that tone contrasted with the words sent a shiver up my spine. It was always good to remember how very terrifying Masego could be, given reason.

"Regardless," he continued, "before the Gods Above took offence to my polite and legitimate inquiries-"

On the other side of the table, hastily swept into a mess of hay, I noticed what looked like a set of long silver needles burned and melted by Light.

"- I did succeed at part of what I was attempting," Masego continued. "Namely, discerning the nature of what we stole."

"Her aspect," I said.

"Yes," he patiently replied, "but what does that *mean*, practically speaking?"

"Stewardship over stories," I suggested. "The ability to seen and influence them."

"Yet you've claimed she killed the stories for Evil in Ater," Masego noted. "That goes beyond mere stewardship."

"We don't know her limits," I reminded him.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Which made ascertaining the nature of what we stole all the more important. How powerful is she, to be able to kill half of it?"

I hummed. That would be useful. Strength in a certain way didn't necessarily translate in others, but it'd help scope her out.

"So?" I pressed.

He wrested sorcery from a small gem sown into his belt and began to draw in the air, golden lines like his runes, but I caught his arm.

"I don't need the equations," I said. "They're beyond me. What did you conclude?"

"That even assuming the Intercessor ended stories for Below only in Calernia, which has been your insistence," he said, pausing to allow me to interject.

I simply nodded in confirmation. I'd not been able to feel stories further than Calernia, and I did not believe the Intercessor had either. Our aspects had been similar enough she'd felt threatened, that I'd been close to stealing hers. The scope had to have been similar for that to be possible.

"Even then," Masego continued, "the amount of power involved can mean only two things."

He paused again, which was purely for dramatic purposes and I probably had Indrani to blame for.

"The first that this there is no reason to be concerned," Hierophant pleasantly said, "because she is one of the Gods and can destroy this continent with a wink of her eye."

"Grim," I appreciated. "What's in box number two?"

"She did not destroy anything at all," Masego said. "She has only halted the stories."

I let out a low whistle. If that were true, then we still had a shot at killing the Dead King. If that were true.

"And what do you base that on?" I asked.

"We have only seen one instance of the Intercessor manipulating power on a large scale," he said. "The incident with the original Grey Pilgrim in Levant that was investigated by your minions."

My eyes narrowed.

"The White Knight smote him, but the Bard stepped in and tinkered with the angel's power so it wouldn't kill him," I said. "She changed some properties, yeah, but mostly she *lessened* the power."

"Exactly," he replied with a grin. "That is a precedent. I believe that the stories are not dead so much as lessened to zero."

I grimaced.

"That's useful information, I won't pretend otherwise," I said. "But it's not a solution, Zeze. We can't kill her, so her death isn't a way to end her interference."

Masego laughed.

"That's the beauty of it, Catherine," he told me. "This is not an act of the Gods that happened, or an irreversible destruction. It is an *act of will*. And what does Trismegistus sorcery teach us about these?"



My fingers clenched.

"Will can beat will," I quietly said. "What one does, another can undo."

He nodded.

"Should we find the right lever," Hierophant smiled, "we can get those stories *back*."

## Chapter 28: Grieved

*"Friendship is the sole gift both given and received."*

– Free Cities saying

Even nameless hole-in-the-ground villages had a temple, in Procer.

A bare bones arrangement, of course. It wasn't like the people who'd once lived here had been able to afford bringing in stone. The House of Light was a glorified barn, with shuttered windows on the sides and a surprisingly nice thatched roof. The angle of it was gentle enough I was able to lean back into the prickly straw and leave my legs dangling over the edge. My deadwood staff I left at my side, keeping against my ribs an open bottle of wine as I looked up at the clouds. The day was waning but it was still a fair afternoon, the sun warm and the breeze lazy. I had the third of a bottle warming my belly, the taste of the red sour against my tongue, and I was half asleep already.

I'd taken to sneaking in naps when I could afford to, which was less often than I'd like. My hours were spoken for even on the road. It helped even out for my nights when I could, though. There were only so many times in a row you could wake up halfway to Early Bell and find yourself incapable of falling asleep until the lost sleep caught up to you. My Name was taking the edge off some, but it could only compensate so much: just like when I'd been the Squire, it did not prevent tiredness so much as help me work through it. Sooner or later the dues had to be paid. My fingers clenched around the neck of the bottle. And that was the very thing keeping me up at night, wasn't it? The dues I'd paid in Ater.

There were some dreams even exhaustion was preferable to.

I brought the bottle to my lips, drank deep and forced myself to close my eyes. The nap would do me good. Only there was a scent on the wind, the last wisps of smoke from Masego's work, and it had my jaw clenching. I would not be able to sleep here, I realized. At least not without that fucking nightmare, the way his eyes had widened just the slightest bit as the knife sunk

into his chest. The shiver of pain as the mortal wound was inflicted. It'd been burning that night too, a pillar of green death going up all the way to the clouds.

It was a relief when I felt the magic thrum in the air. Masego had always been a prodigy when it came to controlling his sorcery, the impressively small amount of power lost when casting a spell, but he'd become something else entirely since losing his magic. Not there was not a drop lost, I thought. The only signs he was using magic were immanent – inherent to the formula, inevitable – with not a single emanation phenomenon. I suspected that his spells were now as close to perfect as was possible for a human when he was allowed to take his time.

I did not open my eyes to look at how he was coming up, but I heard him slump down into the thatch and wiggled around until he was more or less comfortable.

"I'll need thicker robes," Masego noted, "if we are to keep doing this. The straw bites at my back."

"Send a requisition request to Vivienne," I snorted.

I was going through secretaries quicker than I was going through swords, these days. I'd lost one to the Clans and the other to a blade in the back, leaving Princess Vivienne Dartwick to settle awkwardly into the role. She had duties of her own and she'd never been quite as good with details as either her predecessors, so the adjunct secretariat was having to pick up the slack. I'd have tried to borrow Aisha from Juniper if I weren't so likely to lose a hand to those pearly whites in the attempt.

"We could avoid thatched roofs instead," Masego flatly suggested. "I'll not begrudge you the habit of finding a perch, Catherine, but you could at least find a comfortable one."

"Slim pickings here," I amusedly replied. "I'll take it under advisement for the next time."

"That is all I ask," he replied, pleased.

There was a moment of comfortable silence, then finally I sighed and open my eyes.

"What brings you up here?" I asked.

"I've done as much to find our leverage as I can without my proper equipment," Masego told me. "A purely magical ritual is not a feasible solution, as I had suspected, so I am broadening the search. The mathematics are rather challenging, it is an interesting area of theory."

I glanced at the dark-skinned man lying at my side, the first Named who had joined me. He'd been Apprentice, back then, but that was no longer the mantle he bore.

"Who am I to ask about the arithmetic of deicide if not you, Hierophant?" I half-smiled.

I glanced to the side, finding his lips quirking, but my brow furrowed. His eye was still missing, the one he'd lost earlier. The skin of the socket was healed, but only one glass eye remained.

"Haven't had time to repair it?" I asked, tapping my own missing eye.

He looked surprised.

"*Repair* it?" Masego said. "That is not possible, Cat. It is not a crossbow whose parts can be swapped out. My eyes were unique, artefacts in the truest sense of the word. No, it is permanently lost to me."

I started in surprise.

"Shit," I said. "I'm sorry, Zeze. I had no idea."

He shrugged.

"You don't seem all that broken up about it," I slowly said.

"One will suffice," he said. "It serves my purposes well enough."

"You've had them for years," I pointed out.

"The loss of my eye was well worth what it allowed me to **Witness**," Hierophant said. "It is not without reason Above guarded the sight so jealously. Did I not tell you, once, that the godhead is a mere trick of perspective?"

I nodded. Hard words to forget when they'd come in the wake of him becoming the Hierophant and binding a princess of the fae standing in the fullness of her might.

"Apotheosis is not a matter of power, Catherine," he said. "Else as the Sovereign of Moonless Nights you would have been as terrible as a great queen of the fae. It is the perception of the laws of Creation, of its underpinning, that sets aside a god from the rest."

"And this helped?" I asked.

"I had a glimpse of work laid down by the Gods themselves," Hierophant said. "It did more to broaden my perspective in an

instant than twenty years of uninterrupted research would have borne. Once again, you have given me a great gift."

"I know what I'm getting you for your next nameday, then," I drily said.

He looked at me, surprised but expectant.

"I'll pluck out the other eye," I grinned. "See if you learn from that."

He rolled his glass eye all the way around, which even after years of war against Keter I had to admit remained an unsettling sight.

"Lucky me," Masego sighed, and extended his arm towards me.

I cocked a questioning eyebrow.

"The bottle," he asked. "Unless you intend on drinking alone. Which is a habit common in drunks, I'll remind you."

"Well," I grunted, "if you insist on putting it that way."

He caught the bottle when I tossed it, because I'd yet to figure out how to fake out that damn eye. He wiped the rim carefully with his sleeve and took a careful sip, getting a smile out of me. He'd been overweight when I first met him. Hard to remember that now. Even through his high-collared robes – black, as always, but bordered in sharp patterns of yellow and green – I could see he was lean, though with barely any muscle to him. He was still very much out of shape. His long braids were woven tightly with enchanted trinkets whose magic he could wrest. His face had changed as he grew old, sharpened as the last of the baby fat melted away and his nose stood out more starkly, so now the braids made his cheekbones look longer.

"I think I prefer red wines," Masego noted. "Though brandy cut with pear juice remains the finest of drinks."

The Grey Pilgrim had introduced him to it while they were working on smiting ritual together. Tariq had been very fond of pear brandy but known it was rather rare outside of the Dominion and so finagled a little recipe with Proceran brandies and pears. It was so horribly sweet I almost felt nauseous just standing near a cup, but Zeze was very fond of the brew. And Indrani liked it when he drank, so no doubt in some supply wagon of the Army of Callow there would be the ingredients for it being smuggled along with actual supplies.

"Good luck getting that in a tavern," I snorted.

"Never again," he darkly said. "There was a rat, Catherine."

"Come on," I complained. "It was once and years ago. We'll take you to a nicer place next time."

Indrani and I had taken him to a tavern Dockside in Laure before the Tenth Crusade, one of those dives we both loved. We'd yet to hear the end of that rat.

"There won't be one," Masego helpfully informed me.

I threw a few barbs his way about tender Praesi palates, he reminded me that in truth it was Callowans who had difficulties with spices, and after a while we settled into a comfortable silence as we passed the bottle of wine back and forth. I felt lighter already. He'd always had a knack for doing that, perhaps because he usually wasn't trying to. If someone were trying to move me I'd dig in my heels, but his sincerity had a way of going right through.

"Got anything else to do before we leave?" I lazily asked.

"Sapan is overseeing the last of our packing," he said. "But yes, as it happens."

"What's that?"

He turned to look at me fully instead of through his own skull, which had me frowning already.

"You need to speak with Hakram," Masego said.

My fingers clenched. So did my guts.

"It's handled," I curtly said.

"It isn't," he replied, shaking his head. "Which is why I bring it up. Indrani tried to before you sent her off to Salia, but you distracted her with sex."

I paused, surprised enough by the bluntness of that to be at a loss for words.

"She says you only do that when you really want to avoid talking about something," Masego frankly said. "Which is why she let you do it. But she was worried, and so am I. You've been putting it off ever since you left Ater."

I'd left before him. He'd stayed to watch my father and Eudokia be put to the pyre before catching up. I'd not asked what would be done with the ashes. I wasn't sure I had a right to.

"I have no time for the personal," I said, but it was a lie.

I did. I just didn't want to deal with it. Masego wiped the bottle, then had a long sip. He set it down into the thatch

carefully. He folded his knees close to his chest, like a child pulling close.

"I ran, after Thalassina," he quietly said. "I could not face the enormity of what had happened there. I had swallowed up hundreds of thousands of souls, swelled with power the likes of which I had never known, and yet I still ran. There were... whispers in my ear. Procer would be where I found how to Papa back, where I could break the crusade that killed him. But deep down, I believe knew I was running."

"It's not the same," I murmured. "You know that. They died, your fathers, but you didn't..."

*Kill them, I could not quite bring myself to say. You didn't kill them, like I killed mine.*

"An argument can be made that I did," Masego said. "If I had not insisted to be out in the Maze, Father might never have reached for the powers that killed them."

*Them and a city, I almost said, but held my tongue. Grief didn't work that way. You could know, in principle, that the death of a city of thousands mattered more on the scales than the pair of people you had loved. But it didn't weigh the same. Grief, it was like a wound. It hurt when it was on you, when it was your flesh split and your bones cracked. You could see someone else's wound, feel for them, but it wouldn't be the same. Our pain always mattered more than other people's because it was the only one that felt real.*

"It does not matter, in the end," Masego quietly continued. "Even if I claimed all the guilt as my own, it would not bring them back. It is just digging to make the pond deep enough to drown."

"It does matter," I harshly replied. "Of course it fucking matters, Masego. *I put a knife in him.*"

My hand swept up and I flicked the wrist, some vicious part of me hoping for a flinch but finding only unruffled patience. I stabbed the knife into the straw, felt it rip through strands of straw. Like killing a scarecrow.

All men became like scarecrows once you killed enough of them.

"That knife," I told him, knuckles turning white from the grip. "Right into his heart. He was dead faster than a prayer, Masego. And he gave me the fucking thing the night we met, did you know?"

I could still hear his voice, the way the blade had glinted in the firelight as he spun the handle towards me. *How far are you willing to go, to see it done?* Far enough to kill him. Had he known, even back then? That it would end with his gift returned

in red. Masego's father had hated me once, because he thought I would be my father's death and he had loved the man deeply. Wekesa the Warlock had always been clever. Masego shook his head.

"You never told me the story," he said. "And when I asked him, he was..."

"Himself," I finished, tone rueful.

My friend nodded.

"I was going to die," I said. "I was heading back to the orphanage and I saw a guard assault this girl. I stepped in, tried to stop it, but another guard got me. He was choking me, then the Black Knight appeared."

What a terror he had seemed, back then, death in unadorned plate. Not even Sabah, for all that she stood heads taller and broader, had filled the alley quite so much.

"We took them prisoner," I said. "And they were going to be turned over to the city guard, only it wouldn't stick. They'd tried to rape and murder, but they'd still get out."

I swallowed.

"So he offered me a knife," I said, "and asked me what I thought was right."

That was the moment that'd begun it all, wasn't it? There had been many crossroads in my life. That night in Summerholm where I became the Squire. The end of the Folly, when I'd embraced the depths of Winter. The battle for Great Strycht, the plea I had made to an enemy with every right to kill me. Even that nightmare in Ater, the sky burning green as I became the Warden of the East. All great pivots, days and night that had decided the lay of my life. But at the source of them all, the origin, it was that evening in Laure. The weight of the knife against my palm as I made my choice and slit two throats.

I'd begun it all in blood, and in blood was carrying it out.

"Did you find it?" Masego asked.

I was silent for a long time.

"I found something," I murmured. "I don't know if it's right, but it's something that made it worth the knife."

"He would understand."

I looked away from my friend.

"He did," I said. "Does that make it any better I murdered him?"

"I loved him too, Catherine," Masego reminded me.

The tone was calm, but there was iron beneath it. A warning to tread lightly.

"Loved them both," he continued. "Aunt Eudokia was never close to us, to anybody but him I think, but I've known them since I could remember."

My gaze was drawn to him and I found him looking east. At the distant peaks of the Whitecaps, through green valleys and heavy mists. The afternoon sun was dipping, falling out of sight. Masego's long, lean face was composed but that was only skin deep. In the depths of the east laid the graves of the only family he'd ever known. And still he looked, with an eye of shadow and an eye of gold.

"Father once told me the day might come one of them killed another," Masego said. "That they had won against the odds for long, but it would not last forever. That perhaps Aunt Sabah would fall too deep in the Beast, that Father would delve into things best left buried or Uncle Amadeus cross one line too many. And he made me swear, that day, that I would forgive whoever survived."

My breath caught in my throat.

"He said," Masego continued, "that I must. That he did not want me to lose all of my family for one death."

"Praesi," I said.

It was neither praise nor curse. Maybe a little of both.

"These are the lives we live, Catherine," he gently said. "We kill and we win until we lose and we die. We are the children of the knife. And so I still love you, even though I watched the woman who used to bring me lemon tarts bleed out on the stairs. Even though you killed the man who taught me it was all right to be as I am, that I should not be fearful of it."

It was perhaps the most loving thing anyone had ever told me. The obscenity of it made me want to throw up. I felt my fingers shaking around the grip of the knife. I'd yet to let it go.

"I thought we would win," I croaked. "That I'd get to keep him. That we'd all get to go home. And instead, Gods..."

He laid a hand against my arm, fingers warm even through the cloth.

"I know," Masego said.



"*Fuck*," I snarled, fearing myself tear up. "We were so close, and he just didn't give me another way. It was all laid out in front of me: him, them, or everyone else. We were going to end it all in one stroke and he just *wouldn't get out of the way*."

I tried to stay angry, but it came out more like a sob. Slowly, delicately, Masego unclasped my fingers from around the knife. I let him and left it in there. Stabbed deep in the straw. I felt like swinging at someone, like hitting the roof or Zeze or even the fucking sky if only so that momentary satisfaction of the *hit* would drown this out for just a heartbeat. Instead I choked on a sob and his hand on my arm gently tugging me forward until my head was dragged down against his leg. He ran his fingers through my hair, soothing me like a child as I bawled my eyes out. He was dead. Truly dead, no trick or scheme or last laugh. In that cruel moment on the steps we'd made our choices and I'd killed him.

I was never going to see him grow old. I was never going to share a drink with him again, sitting in a tent after dark and talking about the way the world should be. I was never again going to know someone who *got* the anger. Who'd felt it too. He was just gone.

When I came back to myself, throat raw and nose dripping, it almost felt like I'd fallen asleep. But I was still here, head on Masego's lap as he gently combed my hair with his fingers. No one had done that for me before, I thought, not like this. Kilian had massaged my back, sometimes even scratched it, but never this. And Indrani had never tried it either. It wouldn't be from her he'd learned that, I thought. It'd have been one of his fathers, both lost in Thalassina. I'd never met Tikoloshe and disliked Wekesa, but never had I doubted they loved their son deeply. I'd known that about them long before I heard of the sacrifice that had broken a city and a fleet, and their love echoed through their son still. Through the fingers combing my hair.

"There," Masego said, sounding awkward as he patted my head. "Better, yes?"

I dragged myself upright, tugging my clothes and wiping my nose with my sleeve. I would have cleared my throat, but it still felt raw.

"Yeah," I rasped. "Better. A little."

He withdrew from me, not out of dislike but because he'd never been all that fond of touching. It knew it to be a mark of great fondness that he'd kept me close for this long.

"It doesn't stop hurting," he said. "It merely... takes a step back. It will always be there, I think. That it what it means to have loved them."

I exhaled.

"Thank you," I got out, even though I didn't want to.

Even though it felt like weakness.

"That is family," he smiled.

And it was. I'd taken me years, but I had found a family of sorts. Made it, greedily clutched it to my breast. Masego and Indrani and Vivienne and all of Rat Company, the Fifteenth. I held as many ghosts as I did living, but they were still mine.

"So return it in kind," Masego said. "Hakram, why is it that you won't speak to him?"

I looked away. It was easier, when you had only the one eye.

"Vivienne thinks it's because you're afraid of ruling without him," he said. "That speaking to him will make it true, permanent."

"Talk behind my back, do you?" I said, but the anger was half-hearted.

"When you turn it," Masego said, "where else can we?"

I winced. From someone else I'd been able to take the lick and move on, just call it a good line and dismiss it, but he didn't play those sorts of games. Sincerity was harder to ignore. So I kept silent for a long time, choosing my words, as he patiently waited. The poison came to me first. It always did, for better or worse.

"He was supposed to be the one who stayed," I admitted. "When all this comes to an end."

"I don't follow," he said.

"You'll disappear into a tower, Zeze," I tiredly said. "And Indrani will keep a home wherever you are, but she'll leave. It's not in her nature to stay. And Vivienne, well, neither of us ever pretended we'd choose the other over Callow. She'll have a kingdom to rule. But Hakram, he was going to stick with me. We were going to build Cardinal together, usher a new age under the Liesse Accords."

I laughed, not hiding the bitterness.

"Only he's bound to the Clans now," I said. "If not for life, then for a very long time. Maybe he'll help, and I'm sure he'll write, but it won't be..."

I hesitated, not quite finding the words.

"It won't be *us*," I said. "It'll be me and him. And I'm not sure that's enough."

Because I was looking forward, into what lay beyond Keter, and what I saw terrified me. They'd be gone, all of them. Not only the Woe but everyone. Juniper and Aisha and Pickler, they weren't going to leave the Army of Callow for a city being built. Not when they'd given years of their lives building that army up from nothing. So one day, after they feasted me in Laure and patted my back and were well rid of the queen that had been necessary in the pit but was embarrassing now that peace had come, I'd begin walking west and found I was left only with ghosts. That, like my father before me, when it came down to it I stood alone.

"You are afraid," Masego slowly said, brow cocked.

He spoke the words like they were the most absurd thing in the world. Like he'd just said water was dry.

"I think I'm past that," I said. "I've seen it on the horizon for too long. Resigned, I think, is the better word."

"Why would you think that?" he asked, frowning. "That we'd leave?"

"Because they left *him*," I harshly said. "After the Conquest was done, when the stories were finished, they split. Captain to her family, your father to his tower and Ranger had already fucked off in the woods long ago. Only Scribe stayed, and my Scribe was supposed to be Hakram. So much for that."

"We're not them, Cat," Hierophant said.

"We carry the legacies," I tiredly said. "And the writing's on the wall. I'm not *angry*, Masego. I just didn't think it through right. I carried the mistakes down a generation. Maybe the next one will do better."

"Catherine," he said, a hint of iron in his tone. "We are not them."

It was easy to say this now, I thought, but it would not last. He was who he was. Here and now my fear brought him guilt, but guilt so rarely won out against desire.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "You want to know why I can't stomach looking at him? Because he knew all this, Masego. Everything I just told you. He knew it and made his choice anyway."

My lips quirked mirthlessly.

"It wasn't the wrong choice," I said. "He did a great good through it. And I should not begrudge him that."

But I did. Because he'd left me, and I knew hundreds of thousands would be better off for it, all of the Clans. But the Clans were far and it was my flesh split, my bones cracked. The queen saw nothing to forgive, but it was not the queen who loved him. Masego studied me for a long time.

"You are keeping something back," he said.

My eye found the knife stabbed into the straw. I reached out to touch it, but my fingers flinched away.

"That night," I said. "In Ater."

The golden eye watched me but the shadowed one allowed me my shame in peace. An even-handed stare.

"On the steps, I made the decision," I murmured. "Them or Calernia. And I hesitated, I did, but it was..."

I bit my lip.

"I knew from the moment I stood at the crossroads," I said, "which choice I would make. I hesitated the same way you hesitated before putting your finger against an open flame — knowing it'd hurt. I knew I'd kill him if it came to that. It was inevitable from the moment the choice was asked of me."

"And you think he'll not forgive you that," Masego stated.

I shook my head.

"I don't know if he will," I said. "But I think yes. Because it took the two of us to end up standing on those stairs with a knife between us. It's not about that. I guess it's about me."

The golden eye watched, impassive.

"Every time I'll look at him," I said, "I'll know. That he's probably the most important person in my life, the first and closest friend I ever made, and I still chose to kill him."

I'd have to live with that, with the scent of it hanging in their air every time we were in the same room. I'd chosen to kill him and we both knew that. How little love mattered to me when there was a war to win, an enemy to beat.

I'd thought I had lines I wouldn't cross.

Masego reached for the bottle and I handed it to him. After wiping it clean once again, he swallowed the last mouthful of the bottle. He grimaced after, for it had been a middling bottle and so the bottom had tasted strongly, and set it down into the thatch.

"It is you who is ashamed," Masego said.

He added nothing, as if waiting for confirmation. Slowly, I nodded.

"Yet it is him confined to distance, even should he wish otherwise," Masego noted.

I grimaced, echoing his own. It was as bitter a mouthful to swallow. My friend waited for me patiently, until I had finished going through all my denials and delays and settled on something I would live with.

"Salia," I said. "I'll join the briefings with Abreha until then, but I'll speak to him alone in Salia. When we can be in the same room."

"That is all I ask," Masego said.

I slumped back down into the straw and so did her. Dusk was approaching, and with it the time of our departure. Three weeks to Salia now, perhaps one more if there were troubles on the way. My fingers found the handle of the knife and closed around it. I wouldn't leave it here, much as a part of me wanted to. *Children of the knife*, Masego had called us. We'd wield them until they killed us all, that was what we'd been born to. All you got, I thought, was to choose what you did with it. If you tried to make the world bright or you tried to lessen it. It wasn't much.

But it was something.

We lied there on the roof in silence until the sun came down.

## Chapter 29: Foundation

*"Who sows without wisdom reaps a field of sorrows."*

– Alamans saying

Travelling through the Twilight Ways was often as a hazy dream, but two days before we reached Salia the world caught up with me.

Archer found us an hour before Morning Bell, as the army prepared to decamp from the riverside where it'd passed the night. I decided to stay behind, passing command of the van to Vivienne, and asked the phalanges to prepare a decent meal for her while she went to bathe in the river. Indrani was in a fine mood for having washed off the stink of the road when she returned, her hair in a braid and her gait loose-limbed. She took her plate – bread and cheese with some cuts of pork – and brought it with her to the ground as she sat by the side of the carved table with a knife in hand. I got a look at the shape of the relief she was starting to carve when I brought her a glass of wine.

A tower aflame, with a man sitting on stairs below and two looming presences on the sides.

My jaw clenched but I said nothing. I ought to be getting used to talk of that night, anyhow. Gods knew my ear would be filled with prattle about it soon enough. I'd had a terse conversations about it over scrying ritual with both Cordelia and Hanno, the Bard blacking out half the stories of Calernia had made that necessary, but those had only been barebone talks. The meat of the information I'd passed on had been through written reports, so it was inevitable they'd want more out of me. I'd been there that night and known more about what was unfolding than perhaps anyone save the Intercessor. Would that it had been enough, instead of a bell being rang for the death of all the Principate north of Salia.

I waited for Archer to have crammed a few mouthfuls and washed them down before the questions began, which she seemed to appreciate.

"So," I said. "Salia."

"I handed back our little heroes to the White Knight safe and sound," Indrani said. "But he was more interested in having talks with Alexis. He's trying to get a grasp on the details of what happened out east, I think."

The Silver Huntress had been involved in nothing I'd not already passed on word about, so if Hanno was looking for an angle he'd be disappointed. He'd already politely asked about the artefact that had 'wounded the Intercessor', but I'd given him nothing. As was my right. Hierophant had built it from scratch, refining the lessons we'd learned trying to trap her in the Arsenal, and he had no claim on any part of it. Even the... Book of Some Things – ugh, that name – wasn't something he had a right to, strictly speaking. I'd set plenty of precedents for stealing aspects and making artefacts of them without anyone else having a claim on them.

No doubt he'd try to ask Sapan as well, if he hadn't already, but that would be another dead end. Masego had kept his temporary pupil far from the work, and though an increasingly skilled mage the girl was nowhere near close to the league needed to understand sorcery of such calibre. She wouldn't be until she either grasped High Arcana or transitioned into a Name that'd bridge the gap of her understanding.

"Let him," I grunted. "He's going fishing in a desert."

There had been a time where I would not have been so wary of Hanno of Arwad, but that time had come and gone. Calernia was falling apart, that was part of it, but there was more. While I had sworn to the Grey Pilgrim that I would reconcile with the

man, the word I was getting out of Salia was making that task out to be increasingly difficult. I leaned forward towards Indrani, even as she began carving out the sides of the Tower.

"And the rumours we heard?" I asked.

She grimaced, brushing back a strand of wet hair sticking to her brow.

"You know I don't have the touch like you and Zeze do," Indrani began. "The knack for telling if someone's a claimant, how their Name is coming along."

"You've been around Named," I said. "You're familiar with what mantles feel like."

"Sure," she waved away, "but I don't have fancy eyes or whatever the Hells it is you use to get it right so often. It's just impressions for me. Not saying I don't have a guess, just reminding you it's that."

"Consider me warned," I drily said.

She rolled her eyes at me, but the levity was short-lived.

"Only met with him twice," Archer said, "but I don't think he's the White Knight anymore."

"Fuck," I said, with great feeling.

I'd been afraid of that. The point of the knife scratched against the tableside, shaving off small slivers to outline flames.

"He a claimant?"

She raised a flat palm then wiggled it, equivocating.

"He can definitely still use Light," Indrani said. "And he's got *something*. But I can't tell if it's the favour of the Seraphim sticking close to him or something else. My nose isn't fine enough to be able to tell those apart."

I sighed, sipping at the cup of lemon water I'd poured myself and wishing it were wine. There was still a day of riding ahead of me, though, and a bellyful of wine would it that a bloody chore.

"He's a claimant," I finally said. "Has to be. If it were Judgement, they'd have done something one of the three times Hasenbach used the ealamal."

Salia had been beset with demons and devils multiple times until enough mages and priests were scraped together to ward the capital and begin layering the countryside with expanding protections. The First Prince had used her angelic weapon thrice

to shut down the Dead King before the need passed, when the Witch of the Woods had arrived and set down a great working that would greatly hinder diabolism within the principality's borders. Now word had it that priests were gathering to the fortified town where the artefact was kept in flocks, Light filling the sky day and night. When the ealamal was next used, Cordelia Hasenbach did not intend for its power to spread no further than Salia's borders. Given that such a power was all but guaranteed to slay any Named sworn to Below, it should be no surprise that I was less than enthusiastic at the prospect.

"So the Hierarch is still tying them up," Indrani noted, sounding admiring. "It's been years, Cat. Didn't think the man had it in him."

"Kairos always had a knack for putting the right madman in the worst place," I acknowledged.

Indrani set down her knife to drink and I sighed, massaging the bridge of my nose. If Hanno was a claimant to the Name I suspected that he was – and the First Prince had implied as much through her last letter – then we had trouble on our hands. I was dead certain that Cordelia Hasenbach was a claimant to Warden of the West as well. It was the Names of my lot that commonly saw claimants kill each other in a competition for the prize, with Above's works having a reputation for being comparatively gentler, but it was a little more complicated than that.

I doubted the two of them were at risk of swordfighting in the streets, but the growing divide between them was turning into a dangerous fault line for the Grand Alliance. The competing claims over the Name were the manifestation of something altogether more dangerous: competing visions for the West. I had been made the warden of Below's works, the guide of its champions and the arbiter of its faithful, but there would need to be another. An equal for me, someone standing on the other side. And it was beginning to look as if the claimants to the Name had very different ideas about what the Role behind it. Ideas that might be mutually exclusive.

I knew the two of them passing well, and neither of them were particularly good at bending when they thought they were in the right. The feel of the region was said to be reflection as much.

"How was the city?" I asked.

"Hasenbach is still beloved in the capital proper," Indrani said. "She's kept them fed while the world goes to shit and she closed the doors on demons. The streets are in her corner, even if there's the occasional riot. But outside? That's where the soldiers are, and there it gets muddled."

I drummed my fingers against the tabletop.



"Hanno's been out on the fronts," I said. "Several of them and from the start. He's been a lot more visible than her."

"He's been pulling miracles out of his ass left and right, you mean," Archer bluntly said. "He's popular even with your folk, Cat, and I don't need to tell you how impressive that is."

I nodded. Hanno had been part of the Tenth Crusade, fought at the Red Flower Vales under the Iron Prince, and my people were not the sort to easily forgive that. Not even in a hero. That he'd won so many of my countrymen over might have been a subject of genuine worry for me if Vivienne hadn't become the Princess. I need not worry of him having undue influence when there was a Callowan heroine for my people to look to for orders.

"This 'Prince White' business," I said. "How widespread is it?"

"Most soldiers call him that, and a fair few even in the city," Indrani bluntly said. "Nobody gives much of a shit that Hasenbach rustled up a few folk to sit in the Chamber and vote that a foreigner can't become the Prince of Brabant even if the crown is offered."

A foreigner, a growing political foe and one Named to boot. It was like some malicious deity had cobbled together a mess whose very nature was bound to make Cordelia Hasenbach see red. I'd seen her get increasingly angry at the 'Chosen' for complicating her efforts to save Procer as the war progressed, and now that the realm had shattered under the weight of horror the leader of the Chosen was being acclaimed as a prince.

"There's no longer a Brabant," I said. "The dead hold everything but the southwestern corner, and it's only a matter of time until those fortresses fall."

"It's not Prince White of Brabant they call him, Cat," Indrani said. "It's just Prince White. And they don't seem to be concerned about where his borders lie, you get me?"

Hellgods, I did. Cordelia was right to be both incensed and worried. If Hanno wasn't the prince of anything in particular, then he was the prince of everything. If people, nobles and armies, started acting like he really did have that authority? My lips thinned. That was not an authority that could live side-by-side with that of First Prince. One of the titles would strangle the other.

"This is more than just a heap of trouble," I finally said. "It's a lake of it deep enough for Calernia to drown in."

If either of them made a move against the other, there was a very real chance that the Grand Alliance would implode before we even began the march on Keter. It wasn't the thought of either left

dead on the ground that worried me, since I doubted either would go that far. But if there was a confrontation there would be a clear winner, and while most the forces would likely follow that victor the most ardent partisans of the defeated would balk. There would be a split, and we simply could not afford that if we wanted to live through the year. They'd be pushing over who got the Book of Some Things, too. Both of them were intelligent enough to know it'd be a boon for their claim and that I'd been intending it for the Warden of the West regardless.

My fingers clenched at the realization that staying out of it was not an option.

"It's bad," Indrani agreed, "but you had to be expecting it. We were never going to march north without an equal for you, Cat. This was always going to have to be settled."

"It's a choice with no good answer," I flatly said.

"Sure there is," Archer disagreed, cocking an eyebrow at me. "Put Shiny Boots in charge."

I blinked in surprise.

"You're in favour of backing Hanno?" I asked, not hiding my surprise.

"He's a twat," Indrani said, "but he's the one with the sword and the cause. I know you like Hasenbach, Cat-"

I made a noise of protest that she pushed right through.

"-but she's a peacetime queen and this isn't peace," Indrani continued. "Diplomacy's done, talks are done. We're going for the Crown of the Dead with a big fucking army and a boatload of Named, and Hasenbach's about as useful as tits on a sparrow for handling either."

"The reason we have armies and food and weapons is said titted sparrow," I reminded her. "I won't argue she's no warrior queen, but she's then queen that's kept us in this war. It's maybe not as pretty a picture as riding in at the last moment with the sun at your back, but it's done a lot more to keep us alive."

Indrani eyed me curiously.

"You like her more than I thought," she said. "Which is fine, Cat. And I know you've never liked turning on allies, that after..."

My stomach clenched. Indrani grimaced.

"Well, you won't be hungry to leave her out to dry is all I'm saying," she hurriedly continued. "But come knocking at Keter's

gates, I know I'm going to feel a lot better about having the fucking Sword of Judgement in charge than I would the Queen of the Highest Assembly."

She met my eye squarely.

"And I think, deep down, so would you," Archer said.

I sighed. It was a fair speech, and she wasn't wrong. But she was looking at it through the lens of winning this war and only that.

"They stand for different things," I said. "Different Roles behind Warden of the West. And I'll need to have a closer look, feel out the shape of it, but I'm pretty sure that Cordelia's my bet if I want the Liesse Accords to be what they should be."

Indrani drank deep of her wine, then sucked at a tooth.

"Maybe," she said. "Might be you're right there. But for any of that to matter we have to survive this war, Cat. And I think he's a better bet for that than her."

"It's how we got into this pit in the first place," I quietly replied, "winning wars and then losing the peace."

We spoke of it no further than that. She'd said her piece, and as far as Indrani was concerned that was enough. The talk moved to lighter things as she finished her meal, travel stories and scurrilous gossip. Apparently the Concocter was scheming to get the Silver Huntress laid and failing rather spectacularly, a very handsome fantassin captain having gotten sent to the healers after an offer for a 'spar' was taken a lot more literally than anyone had expected. Indrani washed down the last of her bread with cold water from the river, then gracefully rose and stretched like a cat. It did interesting things to her figure, since she'd taken off her mail.

She was hesitating, I noticed.

"Did you, uh, have a talk with Masego recently?" she asked.

I half-smiled.

"Yeah, something like that," I replied.

A pause.

"Did it help?"

I looked down at my hand. My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"As much as it can be helped, I think," I murmured.

When I looked up there was no pity in her eyes, which was a relief. I would not have tolerated it. She was pleased, but there was nothing condescending about it – she was just happy to have been of use. I hummed, considering her.

“I suppose good behaviour does deserve reward,” I mused.

“Is Vivienne going to stop stealing my salary?” Indrani drily asked.

I tugged the collar of my cloak, loosened it until it fell to the ground. She looked at me with wide eyes.

“Isn’t the army leaving already?” Indrani asked.

And yet she did not look away as I began to pull at the laces of my tunic.

“We’re already late,” I smiled. “A little later won’t matter.”

I got no further argument after that.

—

I woke up drenched in cold sweat, choking on smoke and feeling warm blood on my hand.

My breath was uneven, panicked, and my hair matted against my head. I forced myself to steady my breathing, in and out until my heartbeat was not so wild. I tossed aside my covers and slid out of my coat, careful not to put my weight on my bad leg. A few limping steps led me to a cabinet where a bowl of tepid water and folded clothes awaited. I splashed my face and my hair, trying to get rid of the sweat, but it was a lost cause. I’d need a bath when we entered Salia tomorrow, I felt like I’d drenched myself in filth. At least my monthlies had stopped again since I’d become Warden of the East, we were right around that time and I’d always hated riding a horse while bleeding.

The Intercessor hadn’t managed to steal that particular comfort away from me, at least, which was a close to a victory as I’d found in Ater.

The gift of the Sisters told me it was past Midnight Bell, not quite halfway to Early Bell, and I sighed as I dripped water down on the cabinet. There was no point in crawling back into bed, sleep wasn’t going to come. I felt wide awake, like I’d just been in a battle for my life. I slipped into trousers and loose green tunic, belting on a sword and a good pair of boots. My hair I left loose, for once, but kept it beneath the hood of a simple grey cloak. If I lit a few candles in here the phalanges would be there in moments, asking if I needed anything, but I did not feel like answering them. Neither did I feel like reading through my

correspondence for the dozenth time, so instead I veiled myself in Night and slipped out into the sleeping camp.

Even in the middle of the night there were people out and about, patrols and sentinels, but they were easy enough to avoid. We'd encamped on the shore of the same river where Indrani had found us, but much further down: it was narrower and shallower here. And a greater distance from the paths we used during the 'day' – as much as it was ever day in the Twilight Ways – but losing another hour setting out come morning was well worth access to running water. I slipped through the wards and headed for the riverside, following the light of distant stars. I found a pleasant nook there, a flat stone nestled in a dip between hills that overlooked the water.

The flowing water was a soothing sight, the way the light of the stars touched the water. It almost looked like fish swimming in the water, the way I'd sometimes glimpsed them near the shores of the Silver Lake back home. The wind was slow, gentle, and I could hear it move the tall grass like a finger stroking a spine. It was warm out, even with the breeze, and with a long sigh I closed my eye. Let the tension that had tightened my shoulder since I woke up leave with the wind. Tariq had made a beautiful realm. I thought of that, sometimes, when trying to understand what kind of man the Grey Pilgrim had been. He'd done dark things, crossed lines even I had balked at.

But the Peregrine had been a man capable of great beauty as well.

My sword belt was pressing against my side uncomfortably, so I unclasped my sheath. Opening my eye, I laid both palms on the pommel of my sword and leaned forward to rest my chin on my hands. I waited, patiently, for the last dregs of the nightmare to leave me. I did not hurry it, fight for it, knowing now from experience that only made it worse. I breathed in and out, letting the wind carry it away like smoke. And that was when I saw her.

I had been, you see, haunted by a ghost ever since Ater.

Not an apparition or a phantom of guilt, but rather a creature of flesh and blood. She had not followed me immediately out of the city, but she'd caught up when the Army of Callow halted in Laure for resupply. Vivienne had told me as much. But while the ghosts had never been far, she had not sought me out either. I'd left opportunities, made them even, but no implicit invitation was ever accepted. Whatever it was that had driven Akua to follow me into the Twilight Ways, she was keeping it to herself. But the journey was coming to an end now, as by midmorning tomorrow we would be gating out near the outskirts of Salia, and so at last my ghost found me.

She was no longer a shade but her steps were still so very light. Her dress was in gold and red, a riding cut for travelling but still ornate in that Praes highborn way – the collar and sleeves were touched with pearls. The cloak over it was grey, almost the same shade as mine, and her hair was kept in place by a hairpin of chalcedony. Shaped like a swan. She turned to me and my heart caught in my throat. How long had it been since I'd seen those lovely golden eyes in a face of flesh and blood? It made a difference, knowing the creature before me was more than smoke and mirrors. Made it more real. More dangerous. She approached in silence and I did not contest it.

My eye returned to the river even as she sat on the stone. By my side but not touching. I could feel every inch of the distance without needing to look. I kept to my silence, listened to the breeze stirring the grass.

"Nightmare?"

I could have lied.

"Almost every night since Ater."

Sometimes I slept through them, but this was not one of the good nights. I breathed out.

"You?"

"I no longer dream."

A moment.

"It reminds me too much of the Mantle," Akua said. "Nothing, then colour again."

I'd never asked her what it was like, being kept in the Mantle of Woe. Never quite dared to. I had known she was not truly awake but not much more than that. A lucid dream was curse enough, I thought, if you knew you could not wake from it. Silence continued in the wake of the words, but it was not comfortable. We had said so many things, the two of us, been so many things to each other, that there could be no such thing as an empty silence.

"I am glad he died."

I snorted.

"I never quite believed you, when you said you didn't blame him for your father," I said.

"It was what you wanted to hear," Akua replied.

I cocked my head to the side, a concession.

"I wish I had killed him myself," she finally said.

I looked at the water, at the silver glint of stars.

"I wish anything else," I told her.

"It wounded you, to wield the knife," Akua said, considering me.  
"Good. *Good.*"

I breathed out a laugh.

"I don't think that's one I'll get over," I admitted. "I think it'll be one of those scars that stay with you, never quite healed."

"You have dealt out many," she said, merciless. "It is only fair, Catherine, that you would bleed in turn."

And how strange was it, that I found comfort in that? In the lack of sympathy, of pity. Stone was hard and cold, but there was a constancy to that. You could make walls of it, rely on it for shelter.

"The world might be ending," I said. "Or at least our little corner of it."

"The world is always ending," Akua replied, indifferent. "The First Dawn promised a Last Dusk."

I chuckled.

"Quoting the Book, Lady Warlock?"

"Even the Book of All Things has its truths," she said. "I no longer have the luxury of blindness."

"Did you ever?"

I felt her smile without turning.

"If I had died young," Akua said. "But you took that from me. You made me a prisoner instead."

"Imprisonment was the least of what was owed."

"You made me a servant."

"You did that to yourself. There only so many fates your people allow for scrapped iron that is not discarded."

"And then you freed me," Akua quietly said.

I kept silent.

"Only you did not such thing," she said. "You taught me the prison, so that I might carry it with me everywhere I went."

I cocked my head to the side.

"Have you?" I asked.

She did not answer. She didn't need to. I had wanted, once, to make her the offer the very night she spurned the Empire. To offer her a way out, a way not to even the scales but put weight on the right side of them. To be enthroned in Liesse, keeper to a greater evil. That night in Salia had not allowed me the luxury, but it did not feel like a defeat. It was not scheme I had laid here. It was not a trick or a play or something that would need to rely on surprise or luck. I had laid a foundation, stone after stone, through years of patience. What did it matter, that a fateful moment had passed?

Fate was character, and I now knew Akua Sahelian's.

"You mean me to hold the Dead King prisoner."

I was not entirely surprised. I'd kept that almost silent and never once spoken the full intention out loud, but against the Intercessor it wouldn't have been enough. She would have been able to follow the thread of the story that was Akua Sahelian and learn it anyway. But only, I thought, if it was likely to work. If the groove was there.

"To take a broken throne in the depths of Liesse," I said, "and hold back the tide."

"And should I refuse?"

I shrugged.

"Nothing. It needs to be taken willingly."

Silence stretched out. She watched the river as well, her breathing quiet.

"I would have seen through you," Akua said, "if you were not in love with me, at least a little."

I kept my eye on the river.

"You do not deny it," she murmured. "I almost wish you would."

Then she quietly laughed.

"Will it be a wound as well, Catherine?" she asked. "Will the scar stay with you?"

It would have been wiser not to answer.



“Yes.”

I’d never quite got the hang of wisdom. Neither had she. Soft fingers – warm now, flesh and blood – cupped my cheek and I did not fight it, let myself be turned to face her. I met her gaze, felt her breath against my lips. But I had my lines and she knew them, read them anew on my face.

“In matters of self-mutilation,” Akua Sahelian murmured, “you truly have no rival.”

Her fingers released me. She rose to her feet.

“I will see you tomorrow,” she said.

I looked at the river but listened to the sound of her steps until it faded. She had not agreed, I thought.

She had not refused either.

## Chapter 30: Salute

*“It is tempting to think of history as a tide, for it excuses our being swept by it. I cannot agree to such defeatism, and so instead I will claim that history is a rope. It may be pulled the other way, despite the labour of your life, but that is never a reason not to try.”*

– Extract from the prisoner’s memoirs of Princess Eliza of Salamans

Some dark, petty part of me enjoyed that the war had finally reached Salia.

The First Prince had rustled up a proper welcome for us, cheering crowds and soldiers in shining armour, but it was like painting over a cracked wall. The impressive numbers that’d turned up were not enough to hide that the streets beyond them were deserted, that people barred their doors and closed their windows. Fear had finally reached the capital of the mightiest realm on Calernia and it was making its people hunch. Huddle in like a child awaiting a blow. I allowed the vicious little twist of satisfaction to linger a while before chasing it away. I had not forgotten the Tenth Crusade, but these days Procer was probably my closest ally. Creation liked its little ironies.

I smiled and waved as we rode down the broad avenue, a company of knights around us. A fourth banner had been added to the three that were customary – mine, Vivienne’s and the Order of Broken Bells – as my heiress had formally founded her Order of the Stolen Crown and ordered its banner sown. I rather liked the look of the heraldry – a golden crown clasped by a white hand, set on

Fairfax blue – as it contrasted nicely to my own silver-on-black as well as the Broken Bells’ bronze-on-black. The Order of the Broken Bells had been my creature, forged out of rebellion and the compromise of traitors, and so it bore my marks. My shadow.

Let the Stolen Crown take after their mistress’ instead, sharing the same gold as her Summer sun resting on the same Fairfax blue. Let them be to her what Brandon Talbot and his unflinching knights had been to me: a sword and a shield, my will made into a thousand thundering hooves.

“Huh,” Vivienne murmured. “Would you look at that? She came out personally.”

I abandoned the almost maudlin thoughts and returned to the here and now, following the Princess’ gaze down the avenue and to a grand plaza. My brow cocked. As Vivienne had said, Cordelia Hasenbach had come to bid me welcome in person. She was astride a horse of her own, one of those great chargers Lycaonese were fond of, and dressed as regally as if she intended to hold court here in the streets. She’d chosen a sweeping gown in dark blue, her riot of golden curls going down her back and held back only by a circlet of white gold, but it was the ermine-bordered cloak over it all that drew the eye. It was almost entirely cloth of gold, bright in the noonday sun.

Clever, that cloak. It drew attention to her height and straight back while hiding away the squareness of her shoulders. I’d never considered the First Prince to be particularly beautiful, but she’d certainly mastered dressing to her advantage better than anyone I’d ever met.

“A beautiful cloak,” Akua Sahelian mused. “Yet chosen, I think, more to contrast the other being worn than to add lustre to her hair.”

When the Doom of Liesse had returned to stand among my council this morning and I had not cast her out, none had spoken a word of it. Vivienne made it a point to rarely speak to her directly and never offer more than frosty hostility, but this once she let out a small noise of agreement. I could see why. Taking in the party that inevitably followed someone of Cordelia Hasenbach’s rank should they go anywhere in public, I saw more than just the expected assembly of nobles and generals. There were Named, too, and only one of them wore a cloak.

Hanno’s suit of plate was simple but beautifully made, the work of his Bitter Blacksmith, and the cloak pale as driven snow that he wore over it only added to the elegant austerity of him. His dark hair was cut even shorter than usual, little more than stubble, but it suited his plain and honest face well. With the sword belted at his hip and the ease of his carry, he looked like a warrior-king of the old breed. I could easily understand why

people had come to call him Prince White. A man like that would have drawn a following even if he'd not whelped miracle after miracle in the defence of Procer as Hanno of Arwad very much had.

I could not help but note that while there were two people just behind the First Prince – dear Frederic of the pretty curls and skilled hands was one, so the solemn man whose helmet was painted with a red crown had to be Prince Otto of Bremen – the Sword of Judgement was not one of them. He'd been left in the general party, a dozen feet behind.

"By rank, he should be standing at her side," I murmured. "He's a high officer of the Grand Alliance."

"What Grand Alliance?" Vivienne asked. "Procer is divided and dying, the Dominion is far and spent. This coalition lives or dies on our say. If it does not offend you, Catherine, what can anyone do about it?"

I grimaced. Razin and Aquiline were further back in our column, leading their company of riders, so at least there'd been no risk of them hearing that. It wasn't that the Levantines had taken that many casualties, since practically speaking Procer alone had lost more soldiers in the first year of the war than the Dominion had fielded throughout it. It was more that, unlike my Army of Callow and the wealthy principalities of Procer, the Levantines had not reinforced the forces they sent north. It was a large army by their standards, involving most of their trained warriors, and if Cordelia hadn't begun feeding them and paying for their equipment halfway through the war they would never have been able to afford fielding it this long.

Lacking reinforcements and grounds to recruit, their losses had accumulated even as their fund ran out. The end of the Isbili dynasty had only worsened their internal issues, according to the Jacks – who had stolen Proceran spy reports, since we had no eyes that far south – since even though they'd essentially been figureheads they'd still been a stabilizing influence. Now the Dominion of Levant lacked a reason to be anything more than a pack of squabbling petty kingdoms and it was only the First Prince's intervention that'd both prevented civil war and kept some manner of commerce going on even as tensions rose. While it was underselling the Dominion to call it spent, in my opinion, Vivienne wasn't exactly wrong either.

With every battle they had less strength to bring to bear, and there was no realistic way that trend could be turned around.

"That is the very reason such a pretty trick will fail," Akua idly said. "When the order of things collapses, what does a man like the Sword of Judgement care for traps of courtesy?"

Her words turned out to be prophecy. I spurred on my horse, my knights parting for me, and Cordelia broke away from her two companions in the same gesture. So did Hanno, riding past a glaring Prince Otto and blank-faced Prince Frederic to catch up to Cordelia as she approached me. I rather admired that the First Prince's face betrayed not a hint of her feelings, though I'd bet rubies to piglets that she was coldly angry. The people in the cheering crowd, shouting her name and mine and Hanno's, they wouldn't realize what had just happened. The nobles would, though, and they'd also see that there was nothing Cordelia could do about it. Some would instead choose to take from the sight that Hanno was rude and gasping beyond his rank, but this wasn't peace time.

Like Akua said, courtesy mattered a lot less when the world was ending.

"Your Majesty," the First Prince greeted me, a warm smile on her face. "Salia is brightened for your return."

Her voice carried, all the more since the crowd had been made to settle since she'd begun riding forward. I'd never actually seen Cordelia have a genuine warm smile about anything, certainly not one that wide, so it always amused me to see how she used their like to play up our rapport in public. It helped her keep her princes in line, though, so I didn't particularly mind.

"Your Most Serene Highness," I replied in Chantant, smiling back and pitching my voice to carry as well. "I return with good tidings: Praes is settled, and now joins us in war against Keter!"

There was some surprise, but soon after the crowd began roaring in approval. Ah, the times we lived in. Who would ever have thought that a mob in the streets of Salia would ever shout themselves hoarse celebrating Praesi? Not me, and I'd lived a stranger life than most. Under cover of the shouts I nodded my greetings to Hanno, who had been waiting for us to finish tolerantly.

"Lord White," I said. "I hear you helped General Abigail pull the Third Army out safely. My thanks for that."

"Your Majesty," Hanno replied, offering a nod. "I could not have held Hainaut had she not been the anvil to my hammer. It's me who thanks you for lending such a sharp sword to our efforts."

His own friendly smile was not fake in the slightest, I thought. He was not the sort of man to feign amity where it was not. I offered him a quirk of the lips, but little more. We had yet to reconcile from the aftermath of the Arsenal, the odd friendship we'd once had long in disrepair. I had sworn an oath to Tariq to mend that bridge, but I had to be careful of how I did. A misstep

here in Salia could have grave consequences. With the first round of greetings done the ceremony could proceed and it began in earnest. Under the eyes and cheers of the crowd the great nobles and commanders in Salia greeted the ones I had brought, Razin and Aquiline reunited with their fellow lord and lady of the Blood for the first time in over a year.

It was all very civil and friendly – I winked at Frederic when he caught my gaze, getting a roguish grin in answer – and every inch of it had been put together so the sight of us would reassure the people of Salia that the world was not ending. It very much was, of course, but considering that with the amount of refugees we'd seen camped outside the capital had likely swelled to entail a million souls the last thing we needed was a panic. However deserved it might be. The procession continued on together, showing off how friendly and allied we all were, until we began to approach the Lineal and its bevy of palaces. There we parted ways, though not before Hasenbach took me aside for a short talk.

"I have had word from the dwarves," she told me.

My fingers tightened.

"About time," I angrily bit out.

The anger was not directed at her. It was the Kingdom Under that'd been taking its time, its representatives insisting that the Grand Alliance's request for talks was not within their mandate to arrange. While it was true that in principle the half-dozen dwarves were there only to negotiate sales of arms and the granting of loans, in practice they'd been ambassadors of the King Under the Mountain. Vivienne and I suspected they'd been putting us off because they were waiting for the result of some military push they'd made underground, while Cordelia had instead suggested internal divisions.

"Indeed," Cordelia tightly said. "Though they now act swiftly. This morning I was granted an audience with a formal emissary at noon tomorrow."

I frowned.

"They knew I was arriving," I noted.

"Most likely," the First Prince agreed. "Naturally, I would request your presence."

"Naturally," I echoed with a smile. "I'll dust off my courtesies in preparation, then. We doing this with a full Grand Alliance roster or appointed representatives?"

"Lady Itima and Lord Yannu have agreed that representatives would simply the talks," she said. "It will hold, unless the other half of the Blood disagrees."

"They won't," I said.

The lordlings trusted me enough to speak for the Grand Alliance, at least, though no doubt the Dominion would want a seat at the table the moment things began to get formalized. The First Prince nodded. There was a short moment of silence.

"You have, I think, grasped the lay of our troubles from that scene at the greeting," Cordelia finally said.

"I had something of an idea even before," I neutrally replied.

"Perhaps we ought to have tea tomorrow evening, then," the First Prince lightly said. "It has been too long since we talked."

It'd been like a week, actually, but I got her drift. She wanted an opportunity to speak a little more freely in private, and she wanted it as soon as possible.

"It better not be that horrible bitter stuff you love," I warned. "I've drunk actual poison that tasted better."

She smiled the smile of someone who was going to thoroughly enjoy trying to bully me into drinking it again.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Cordelia Hasenbach smiled.

Lying, like a goddamned liar.

—

It was not unexpected that I'd get visitors not long after settling into the palace, but to be honest I'd expected it to be either officers from the Third Army or Procerans. Instead I was genuinely surprised when a servant announced the name of my first visitor: Secretary Nestor Ikaroi of Delos. Considering that as far as I knew the League of Free Cities did not yet have a formal presence in the city, I hadn't anticipated anyone from there calling on me. Last I'd heard, the armies of the League had just begun to reach northern Iserre. I'd always liked the old man, though, and since I had no reason to turn him away I had him brought to me.

I'd been granted this palace as my lodgings every time I visited Salia and Vivienne had used it in my absence, so I had a place in mind to receive him. It wasn't actually one of the dozen salons that infested this place, a winter palace meant to accommodate large balls, but rather one of the smaller rooms adjoining the great ballroom. See, all these fine Proceran folk come here for dancing and debauchery liked a drink. It was only natural there'd

be a bar in one of the side rooms, where a wild spread of wines and liquors could be asked for. The place wasn't fully stocked, since Cordelia had been cutting costs everywhere, but it had enough left to make it worthwhile.

Besides, there was something pleasantly familiar about standing behind the counter with the drinks.

Nestor Ikaroi was announced by a Proceran crier and allowed in by legionaries, giving me my first look at the man in quite a while. His hair was striking: long and pure white, it was kept in a ponytail going down his back. The pureness of the colour contrasted with his wrinkled skin, which had the look of old leather, and made his blue eyes stand out. On each cheek he bore two tattooed stripes, one blue and one black. The old man was a Secretary, as high as one could rise in the ranks of the Secretariat. There were only ten askretis of that rank in all of Delos and he was said to be the oldest. He looked, I thought, rather vigorous. Like the war had spared him, unlike the rest of us.

"Secretary Nestor," I said, leaning against the counter. "Welcome."

"Queen Catherine," he replied, bowing low. "It is a pleasure to be in your presence once more."

I waved that away, but I was smiling. His genuine friendliness had long kept him my favourite of the high-ranking League diplomats.

"Can I offer you a drink?" I asked. "There's a bit of everything in here."

"All the more luxurious," the old man said amusedly, "for having a queen pouring them. Is it perhaps true, as your subjects claim, that you once ran a tavern in Laure?"

I scoffed. *Ran* a tavern? I'd been much too young and poor to own anything but the clothes on my back and the coin I'd saved up for the War College.

"I asked first," I said.

"Are you perhaps familiar with *isitos*?" he asked.

"Heard of it," I said. "Fig liquor, usually cut with water and leaves of mint."

"The custom in Delos is to use a quarter orange instead of the lime," he replied, "but either way would be fine."

I went looking and though there were lemons there did not appear to be limes. There was mint, however, and two bottles of *isitos*.

I presented them to the old man, who without hesitation chose the smaller one. From Penthes, he told me, which for all its many sins made excellent liquor. I made two tall cups of it, one for each of us, and handed him his own.

"I was a waitress, at a place called the Rat's Nest," I told him. "The first roof I ever owned was when Malicia granted me Marchford as my demesne."

Blue eyes brightened. Nestor Ikaroi has close ties to the scholars of Delos' famous libraries, particularly those whose duty was to chronicle the history of Calernia as accurately as possible. Their histories were said to be the finest of the continent bar none. As a result, rather like a magpie the old man tended to be delighted whenever I tossed a few details about either my life or my campaigns his way. He sipped at the drink and smiled, praising it, and I tried it myself. It was actually pretty decent, I thought. Not smooth in the slightest, the burn was still felt in the throat, but the water and mint eased the taste of liquor. I could almost taste the figs.

Some idle talk was had, but I was a busy woman and he knew it. Soon enough he got to the reason he'd come here.

"I was instructed by Empress Basilia to approach you in private," Secretary Nestor frankly said. "With the assent of the League."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"That sounds like foreign politics," I said. "Which are the sole province of the Hierarch."

The Republic would be furious if they learned Anaxares the Diplomat was being circumvented. Not that, as far as I knew, they were ever *not* furious.

"Ah," the white-haired man smiled, "but this is a different matter. On the behalf of the Protector of the League, I am approaching an ally to discuss a common enterprise."

Meaning they'd finally found a way to work around the absence of the Hierarch that wouldn't send Bellerophon on the warpath and damage the foundations of the League. Basilia, as Protector, was charged with the *defence* of the League of Free Cities. Anything that could be made to fit under that aegis was fair game, even if it meant walking a very narrow line with the powers of the officer of Hierarch.

"That's a lot of power you're giving a hereditary office," I noted.

He smiled like an old, patient shark.



"Should she overstep, a majority vote is all that is required to declare a matter under the jurisdiction of the Hierarch," Secretary Nestor said.

Ah, so that was how they were going to keep her in line. The League wasn't a kingdom like Callow, its laws didn't really care for precedent. If a king was allowed a power in Callow once, it pretty much became a power of the royal house unless civil war pried it out of their grasp. In the League, though, all that was needed was enough of the cities agreeing a right did not exist for it not to. No doubt common ground was already being found behind closed doors between cities worried by Empress Basilia's ascendancy. It'd be a struggle to the death, I thought, until either the office of Protector was reduced to a ceremonial title or the opposing cities were slowly stripped of their independence.

It was also, at least for now, not my fucking problem. For once.

"That'll get interesting," I said, meaning it. "I'm all ears, Secretary. What can I do for my friends in the League?"

"Given your understanding of the powers and prerogatives of the Hierarch," he said, "you will understand, I think, that it is not possible for the League to sign onto the Liesse Accords."

"Not at present, yes," I said, frowning.

It'd count as foreign policy, so only their long-lost madman could actually put a quill to parchment to bring the League into the fold.

"That is an unfortunate situation, given that Empress Basilia is an ardent partisan of the Accords and many of us share her opinion," Secretary Nestor said.

I almost smirked. Say what you would about Basilia Katopodis, but she'd not forgotten who had backed her when she'd gone off to campaign around the Free Cities. I'd been her patroness and while my leverage had weakened with her rise to prominence she had not cast aside her old debts. She'd back me for the Accords and the war on Keter, which had been what I wanted most from her.

"I do not have a reputation for patience, I know," I said, "but you would be surprised."

The old man bowed.

"Yet we would offer a gesture of goodwill within our means," he said. "The members of the League, save for Bellerophon which is still putting the matter to vote, have adopted laws of the same text."

I hummed, reluctantly impressed. That was certainly an alternative. It'd lack the teeth of the actual Accords, of course, which laid down provisions for its enforcers to be able to hunt Named breaking the terms across the territory of all signatory nations, but it would still be a great step forward. Neither villainy nor heroism would be allowed to be made illegal and there would be limitations on the use of both diabolism and angel-calling. I was, I decided, being courted. Or my goodwill was, anyway. Which meant the League was now going to ask me for a favour.

"A greatly appreciated gesture," I said. "It shows adherence to the spirit of the Accords, which is perhaps even more meaningful than ink on parchment. Though it seems it my friends from the south helping me, instead of the other way around."

I ended that on a smile, thin as it was. Nestor Ikaroi took my hint that I'd like to see the bill for the goods now and did not dance around, which I appreciated.

"While the League is committed to ending the threat of the Dead King," the old man said, "concerns have been raised about the feasibility of such a deed."

I sipped at my drink.

"I won't pretend it will be easy," I said. "You know better. But I wouldn't be leading my armies into the storm if I did not believe victory possible."

If it came to that, if all was lost and Calernia beyond reclaiming, I'd hole up behind the Whitecaps as long as possible while building a fleet to lead an exodus across the Tyrian Sea.

"The concern," he delicately said, "is not of a military nature. It is our understanding that you have mustered great armies in the east and brought back the greatest sorcerers of Praes."

I nodded, frowning.

"It is a political concern, then," I said.

"Swiftly tires the horse with two riders," Secretary Nestor quoted.

I kept my face calm. Yeah, perhaps it'd been too much to hope that the League wouldn't have noticed the tensions rising at the heart of the Grand Alliance. Now they were wary of bringing their armies in what was beginning to have the shape of a schism just as the Dead King began devouring the Principate. That was, I grimly admitted, a fair concern to have.

"A temporary state of affairs," I said.

"We share the opinion," he said. "I am simply charged to express the Empress' curiosity."

"About?"

"Who you believe will be sitting the saddle," the old man said.

Gods. That was what the entire reason he'd come here today, wasn't it? They wanted to know who I'd back, if it came down to it. The First Prince of the Sword of Judgement.

"That's not for me to decide," I said.

A pause.

"May I be frank, Queen Catherine?" Secretary Nestor said.

I waved him on.

"While you show wisdom in not standing too close to the flame," he said, "it is an undeniable truth that it is not possible for either to rise with, if not your support, then at least your tacit approval. Your influence is too deeply entrenched."

And he wasn't wrong. I'd done it on purpose, too. Being the representative for Below under the Truce and Terms, standing as Queen of Callow and First Under the Night. Warden of the East, now. I'd accrued so much authority that, while I might not be able to make the choice of who rose to command Good for the end of the war on Keter, I would be able to refuse that choice and very possibly make it stick. I'd seen this as a conflict between Cordelia and Hanno, but in the eyes of everyone else I was just as much of a danger. If I refuse to work with whoever won and took my armies home, it would not be a stretch to say that the war was lost. *And trying to approach either of them might be seen as a foreign nation back a horse, so I'm actually safer for the League to talk to.* Ikaroi was not, I realized, the last envoy who would approach me over this. There would be others, and beyond all the courtesies and the flattery all of them would be addressing me using the same title: kingmaker.

I sipped at my drink, hiding my dismay. I'd wanted to keep my distance as much as was possible, but it was now clear to me there would be costs to that. Would the League keep supporting the war if Procer seemed about to tear itself apart again and I was unwilling to step in? That Nestor Ikaroi was here at all spoke to hesitation. He was not so much invested in my answer as in my having an answer: someone I'd back, a designated winner. That was what Basilia and the League really wanted, the assurance that this would not get messy. Who long before Praes asked the same, or the Clans? I set the drink down.

"It has not come to that," I finally said. "Nor will it. I intend to mediate."

"Of course," Secretary Nestor said, politely unconvinced. "Yet, I must ask, should mediation fail. If a choice must be made?"

I clenched my fingers, unclenched them. It was playing with fire to get too deeply involved. But I wasn't sure it was an option *not* to.

Necessity, as always, was queen.

"If it comes to that," I quietly said, "I will let you know who's to sit the saddle."

## Chapter 31: Premises

*"Thirty: while it is a viable tactic to swing using a chandelier or a rope, it is significantly less viable to wear armour when doing so."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

You couldn't use the usual sort of table when entertaining dwarves, not unless you wanted to offend them by stacking cushions on a chair.

The First Prince was a graceful host and unlikely to be the first of her office to have received envoys of the Kingdom Under, so the neat little salon where we were seated did not make that elementary mistake. Over a floor of warm-coloured wood, thick and plush Arlesite rugs had been thrown for us to sit on. Even with my legs folded – I'd drunk a brew to take the edge off my bad leg – I wasn't all that uncomfortable, and the low table we were both seated at was a work of art. Intricately carved and painted, it depicted the making of Creation as described in Proceran texts. The scenes spiralled inwards, ending in the moment where the Gods had taken their rest.

Unlike the people of the Principate, Callowans put no real stock in Arianna Galadon's 'Truths of the Shore'. Which she hadn't even written herself, anyhow, as they were a collection of her teachings written down by her followers. Callow's own House of Light was the oldest on Calernia the way most people saw it, with only the priests of Atalante having a legitimate claim otherwise, so my people tended to dismiss anything come out of Procer as empty posturing. I largely shared that opinion, even though many of Galadon's teachings had been sensible, but for all that skepticism I would not deny that some of the hymns written down in the book were quite beautiful.

The painted depiction on the table did them justice, not that the two dwarves seated across from us seemed to care in the slightest.

I could tell because I'd met the pair of them before. The Herald of the Deeps remained the tallest of his kind I had ever met, at least an inch over five feet and bare of armour. He yet wore the same dark green – so deep it was nearly black – colour I had always seen him in, but his clothing had grown more elaborate. I could see five different layers to the folded cloth, one almost like a tunic at the bottom while the others crisscrossed over each other at different angles and cuts. I could not quite tell where it began or ended. His beard and eyes matched the cloth, unlike the braided dark hair, and looked like strands of green set in a craggy face whose skin was as hide. In the light of the day, his eyes were unsettling large.

It was the lack of iris, I thought, it made them look even larger than they were. Owl-like.

The lieutenant seated half a foot behind and to his left hadn't changed in the slightest, though. The deed-seeker I knew as Balasi still had so many skulls hanging off him that I could hardly see the armour beneath them. Some taken, some earned, all trophies to raise his rank. His hair and beard were yet blond, though the elaborate thick tattoo – I'd once thought it face paint, but now saw otherwise – looked different in daylight. It depicted a Horned Lord's head and fangs, the ink still black but looking iridescent when sunlight hit it at the right angle.

I'd learned they would be the envoys within half an hour of Cordelia learning it, this very morning, which had been long enough to share what little I knew about the pair before the talks were had. The Herald of the Deeps, whose name was Sargon, had been the leader of the dwarven expansion into Everdark in both a religious and military sense. He definitely had enough pull to talk for the entire Kingdom Under, since he had when striking a deal with Sve Noc through me, but there were limits to his influence. I'd long suspected he had volunteered to lead the Fourteenth Expansion in part to get away from internal enemies, heading out to the fringes where there'd be no rival.

Unfortunately for us, that was very little to go on. The politics of the Kingdom Under were not so much opaque as fucking invisible to the nations above. We heard of it when they were making war against other underground nations – though with the drow exodus, there were now none left – and they visibly kept an eye on affairs near dwarven gates, but no one had eyes below the ground. We didn't even know if there was truly a King Under the Mountain, whether it was a ceremonial title or one of genuine authority. Even the span of their empire was mostly speculation, with only the wildest of guesses made at their total population.

What we did know was that the Kingdom Under fully mobilized would almost definitely win a war against even a fully united coalition of surface nations. When my father had once called it the only nation of Calernia that was more than a regional power, he'd not exaggerating. Even Triumphant had been satisfied by token gestures of submission and promises of tribute when she'd been conquering Calernia. When it came down to it, if we wanted to have a real shot at beating Keter we needed the dwarves. Their armies, yes, but even more importantly their *supplies*.

The only way it would be possible for an army the size of the one needed to take Keter to be fed was through their tunnels, and to be honest they were probably the only nation capable of moving that much food so quickly anyway. We wanted their soldiers badly, since they had creations up their sleeves that made goblin work look like children's toys and the heaviest foot this continent had ever known, but the supplies were even more important. We could possibly win without the help of their armies. Without a deal for supplies, though, our only choice would be storming the walls of the Crown of the Dead repeatedly until our food ran out. Formalized suicide, in other words.

So we needed the Kingdom Under and they knew it. The question that remained was, what would they ask in exchange for their help? That was the question on my mind and Hasenbach's as the Herald set down the cup of Merovins golden wine he'd been served. There was exactly one vineyard in all the world where that wine was made, the same one where most of the ancient rulers of Salia was buried. The handful of bottles it made every year were worth a small castle each, and by custom only drunk by royalty.

I actually thought it tasted kind of sour, but it would have been impolitic to say as much.

"A rare drink," the Herald of the Deeps said.

In Chantant. Mine had gotten good enough I was comfortable even in talks like this, and theirs was better than their Lower Miezan. It always startled me to remember that Chantant wasn't the First Prince's native tongue either. Lycaonese spoke Reitz. Mind you, as a princess she'd probably been taught the language as a child anyway. I'd been my own mistake to start picking up languages so late in my life.

"Bettered for the company it was poured in," Cordelia Hasenbach replied with a distant but friendly smile.

I put my elbow on the table and rested my chin against my palm. Hopefully we'd stop with the courtesies soon, I felt like we were all more than ready. Balasi must have agreed.

"It is our understanding the Grand Alliance has been seeking to come to terms with us," the Seeker of Deeds said.

"The Grand Alliance desires to negotiate several arrangements," Cordelia smiling corrected, "regarding the war prosecuted against our common enemy, the Dead King."

Balasi was unimpressed.

"We see little war," he said, "and much retreat."

"We've done a lot of dying, it's true," I said. "Tasteless of you to complain, Seeker Balasi, since it will have bought your people time to make your move below."

The dwarf turned to match my eye, but I stared him down. My face was blank as a mask. After a moment his jaw tightened and he looked away.

"We have achieved much these last few years," the Herald said. "Absent conflict in the Everdark, the Fifteenth Expansion began early and colonization has begun. After a thousand years of trials, the great encirclement is finally finished."

I breathed in sharply.

"You've surrounded the Kingdom of the Dead entirely," I said.

He looked pleased, green eyes wide.

"The fortresses still lack cities, but the circle was closed," the Herald of the Deeps said. "Seven rings of stone and steel now contain the Dead King and his works."

Fuck. That was bad news. Part of why the Kingdom Under had been selling us cheap weapons by the wagonload and keeping the Firstborn fed had been that we were useful to them: by drawing the Dead King's armies to them, we allowed them to expand and fortify around him uncontested. Only my calculation had been that they'd not finish the encirclement this generation, not when their current expansion – the Fourteenth – was aimed at the Everdark. I'd badly miscalculated how capable they would be of taking advantage of Sve Noc ceding their old territories. And now, with their circle of rings of steel in stone standing, they were coming to speak to us again.

Having significantly less use for our continued survival.

"If I were to ask," Cordelia mildly said, "when the last fortress was finally raised, I imagine it would be a recent day indeed."

"Eight days," Seeker Balasi said.

Yeah, the First Prince had seen it to. They'd put us off until they were sure their defensive position was solid underground, and now they were coming to talk when they had the upper hand. Hells, more than the upper hand. As far as they were concerned

they had all the fucking hands, and they weren't entirely wrong either.

"What a strange happenstance," Cordelia said. "I must congratulate our ally on the swift completion of its defensive works."

"All is possible in the service of the King Under the Mountain," Balasi replied.

"Indeed?" she said. "How pleasing to hear, as we mean to discuss a bargain regarding the sale and movement of supplies."

"You want us to feed your desperate offensive against the Crown of the Dead," the Herald said, voice even. "Without coin to pay for it, even as your empire falls apart around you. A bold request. Some would call it *insolent*."

"Nah," I smiled, wide and without mirth. "Insolence would be offering meat to the butcher and then whining it got chopped, Herald. *Surely* that's beneath everyone here."

Cordelia's shoulders tightened at my side, but she did not try to intervene. She trusted me to back off if I pushed too far.

"The efforts of the Grand Alliance in fighting our enemy are remembered," the Herald finally said. "Yet much is demanded while little is offered."

"If payment is the trouble, then there is no trouble," the First Prince said. "Though the Principate may lack the immediate means to pay and I cannot speak for our allies, we are willing to sign a treaty of repayment and even give you access to our books so that an agreeable number of years can be found."

"That is-" Seeker Balasi began, but she cut him off.

"Which leads me to believe, Your Eminence, that it is not coin the Kingdom Under wants of us," Cordelia Hasenbach continued, staring down the Herald.

It my turn to tense. I could feel the Herald of the Deeps through my Name. Only dimly, and I could not trace out the manner of stories that were his bread and butter, but what I could tell was that he leaned Above's way. Not that I was certain I would have authority over him even if it were otherwise. His Name felt... strange to me, as if it was made of crystal instead of the usual starlight. Either way, even if he was one of Above's that did not meant he was not dangerous. When the Fourteenth Expansion had been planned, the dwarves had thought they'd end up needing to kill Sve Noc.



And they'd sent the Herald of the Deeps without another Named, which meant they had thought he had a genuine shot at killing a pair of goddesses.

Power like that married to the dwarven contempt for other races was for an unpleasant interlocutor to deal with. The green-eyed dwarf studied the First Prince for a long moment, then snorted.

"It is so," the Herald said.

This time when Balasi spoke up, Cordelia did not interrupt. There was no reason to, since she'd already made her point: the deed-seeker might be subordinate to the Herald, but she was not subordinate to me. She spoke for the Grand Alliance just as much as I did, if not more. Sargon did not seem convinced, but he'd seemingly not wanted to argue the point either.

"There are no guarantees that the attack on Keter will end in victory," Balasi said. "Or that nations signing treaties now will survive the coming decades. A considerable expense would be undertaken on uncertain grounds. The Kingdom Under requires more practical and immediate payment."

Whether they actually thought Procer would splinter even if we won or if they were just pushing I couldn't be sure, but I honestly couldn't argue with the uncertainty there. The Principate had lost massive amounts of farmlands and been depopulated in a way that'd shift around where its traditional centres of power had been. It might very well blow up even if we did beat the Dead King.

"And what might its nature be?" Cordelia calmly asked.

"Creusens," Seeker Balasi said. "Holden. Penthes."

I'd been a long time since someone had surprise me so utterly I could not even begin to think of an answer. They were serious, weren't they? The Kingdom Under was asking for cities. Creusens, the capital of the principality of the same name out in western Procer. Penthes, to the very east of the League and already near a known dwarven gate. And Holden, the seat of the former barony of Holden. A city in Callow. *My fucking city*. After it sunk in, it was not surprise that held my tongue. It was the certainty that if I began if I opened my mouth, I would say things and it would only end when there were corpses on the floor.

"You require that we cede three cities," the First Prince said with admirable calm. "One of which is, I might remind you, not from a nation signatory to the Grand Alliance or in our power to deliver."

"Yes," Balasi replied without batting an eye. "We will provide formal terms, but I can give you the essentials before then."

"Please do," Cordelia smiled, hate cold in her eyes.

"The cities and attendant lands will be ceded to Kingdom Under and annexed to the territory of the nobles ruling below them," the deed-seeker said. "Their inhabitants may stay as sworn subjects or leave. There will be no restriction of goods coming in or out."

My eye narrowed. It wasn't even a loose protectorate like Refuge or a close relationship like with Mercantis they were aiming for. These were permanent footholds for them on the surface. It occurred to me, suddenly, that the Kingdom Under might be thinking further on than any of us. Should the Dead King be destroyed, would it not be the master of all the underground? It would take generations to settle it all, I thought, but in time they would. And when they did, where else was there to go but *up*? My fingers clenched.

"A straightforward affair," the First Prince said. "We thank you for bringing the offer."

Balasi looked like he might have wanted to stay and talk more, but the Herald's eyes had found my own. Whatever he found there convinced him not to linger. They briskly made their goodbyes and were ushered out. It left the two of us seated together. My fingers closed around my cup of wine.

"Do you have any particular attachment to the cup?" I calmly asked.

She shook her head. I *smashed* it against the table, crushing crystal and spilling gold on the painted wood. I would have torn the fucking table apart too, but it wasn't the furniture that was responsible for the rage in my belly.

"Those fucking rats," I coldly said. "I ought to have ripped their goddamned heads off."

"For the better you did not," Cordelia noted. "It would have taken them at least a sennight to replace the envoys."

The petty act of destruction had brought just enough satisfaction that I mastered myself. I breathed in and out, pushing down the anger. It wouldn't help me here.

"They can't believe we'll accept that," I said. "That the *League* would accept that."

"I imagine they believe we will refuse them at first," the First Prince said. "And then we will lose another third of Procer as well as a few armies and return to them appropriately chastened. Time is on their side, Catherine. The longer the Dead King

devours us, the longer they have to prepare their defences against him."

"He's also getting stronger," I curtly pointed out.

"It does not matter," Cordelia tiredly said. "They are calculating, accurately so, that we will bend to their terms long before Keter becomes beyond them. I imagine they will offer to send troops as well in exchange for a fourth city, either Bayeux or Vaccei."

Eastern Procer, right up against the Whitecaps, or the northernmost city of Levant. A loose line across Calernia, allowing them to trade for what they wanted without any possibility of a common front to check them emerging between the powers of the surface. Fuck.

"I cannot accept that bargain," I honestly told her.

There was a long moment of silence.

"We have not yet seen the full terms," Cordelia finally said. "They have promised to provide them promptly and I see no reason to disbelieve them. Let us not speak of this blindly or in the throes of anger. We are meeting for tea tonight, it can be seen to then."

I jerkily nodded. She wasn't wrong that angry as I was there'd be no point in actually discussing anything. We parted ways soon after, and I had to put a spring to my limp.

I'd gotten a lunch invitation.

—

I got ambushed.

Didn't almost get shot this time, it wasn't the assassin kind of ambush, but I didn't see it coming either and I should have. When I was invited to have my midday with Razin and Aquiline, I'd expected that a couple of their captains would be there but no more. We'd had similar enough meals on campaign, they bringing their officers and me mine, and I'd thought it a nice gesture of the lordlings to do the same even here in Salia. A sign of continued fondness even now that they were no longer under my direct command. Instead, just past Noon Bell, I found myself seated with the full roster of the ruling Blood and two Bestowed.

My ducklings I knew well enough by sight. Lord Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood, dark-haired and sharp-faced with the last touches of youth to his cast burning as he turned into the man he wanted to be. Lady Aquiline Osen of the Slayer's Blood, every inch of skin painted in green and bronze as she moved with the grace of

an exceptional killer. The other two I knew less, but of the pair it was Lord Yannu Marave of the Champion's Blood I was more familiar with. Careful Yannu, they called that mountain of broad-shoulder muscles. At least in his forties, and his unnatural calm put truth to the sobriquet. Lady Itima Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood was the last, oldest and lean and whip-harsh. She and her sons were a cunning and vicious bunch.

That left only two. The Barrow Sword, Ishaq, who stood not much taller than me but much broader. His dark and well-groomed beard was as much a signature as the two streaks of ash-grey beneath the eyes that were his face paint or the ancient bronze scale he'd robbed from a barrow along with the sword that had seen him Named. And a woman I still hated like poison, for she had killed Captain: the Valiant Champion, Rafaella. Tanned skin, like all the others, and with a braid of brown hair going down her back. She had the face of someone who smiled often and easy, like Ishaq she was a picture of classic Alavan good looks: short, stocky and built like a brick wall.

The lordlings were the ones hosting, so they were the ones to greet me and offer hospitality – which was probably the only reason a fire was lit in the hall. Like the Taghreb equivalent, Levantine guest right was heavily bound to the symbolism of sharing a fire. The serious, formulaic greeting that Razin and Aquiline had offered petered out into silence as I kept standing and did not answer. Tension rose, then I sighed. I raised a finger, telling them to wait, and went fishing through the pocket of my cloak until I had my pipe in hand. I smoothly stuffed it, passing a palm over the wakeleaf to light it. I breathed in deep, the acrid smoke burning my lungs pleasurably, and blew out.

"All right," I finally said. "Lay it on me."

A moment of silence.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Aquiline tried.

I flicked a glance at the Valiant Champion.

"No."

It would be a cold day in Levant before I drank with that one. The lot of them was seated on the other side of the long table, and I drew back my chair with an eye to scraping the wood against the floor to make as much of that horrible noise as possible. Whatever their intentions might be, I'd make it clear that springing this on me by surprise was not putting me in the finest of moods. Dropping into the seat, deadwood staff leaning against the side, I leaned back and blew out a puff of smoke.

"Lords and ladies of the Blood," I mildly said. "Ishaq. The rest. It appears this is a larger gathering than it'd been implied to me I would be showing up for. Should I have put on a crown?"

Lord Yannu shook his head.

"It is not as Queen of Callow that your presence was sought sought," the Lord of Alava said.

They wouldn't care about my being First Under the Night either, so that left only one hat. I rolled my shoulder and smiled. Night came to me, the power sluggish and slow in the day but never entirely beyond reach. The room cooled, its shadows deepened.

"Then standing courtesy for the Warden of the East," I calmly told him. "Is 'Your Excellency'."

His eyes met mine, but I'd chided harder men than Careful Yannu. He conceded with a nod.

"Good," I cheerfully said. "Now what can I do for you fine fellows?"

Eyes flicked to the left end of the table, where the Barrow Sword sat. Opposite of the Champion.

"I asked for your arbitration, Your Excellency," Ishaq said. "The Dominion has agreed to entertain my demand for my deeds to be added to the Rolls, but I have some... concerns. As my representative under the Truce and Terms and a trusted mediator, you are uniquely suited to help."

I cocked an eyebrow. The one on my dead eye, though sadly the people here were all too hardened to be moved by anything like that.

"It would be pointless for me to accept the role if all parties involved don't agree I should hold it," I said, an unspoken invitation.

"Malaga endorses your presence," Razin said.

"So does Tartessos," Aquiline dismissed, as if it had been a given.

My gaze moved to the right side of the table. Lord Yannu inclined his head.

"You have always dealt in good faith with us," the Lord of Alava said. "Alava agrees."

Itima Ifriqui, to his right, sucked at her teeth. The Brigand's Blood were known for their viciousness and dislike of foreigners, though ironically enough Lady Itima was Cordelia's closest ally

in the Dominion. There was no love between us, though, and if a no was going to come it'd be from there.

"You carried the Peregrine back to us," the Lady of Vaccei said. "Honour was earned. Vaccei agrees."

And that left only one. Rafaella of Alava, the Valiant Champion. The woman holding the same Name as one of the legendary founders of the Dominion, what they called an inheritance in Bestowal – as opposed to the inheritance of Blood, which all here carried as descendants of those same heroes. The rare few who inherited both Blood and Bestowal were raised above all others by Levantines. Tariq had been the last, and of the greatest of the lines of the Blood too. The Valiant Champion was, in principle, *Lady* Rafaella yet I'd never heard the title granted to. I'd never heard of her being close to Yannu, the lord of that Blood, either and I could not recall ever seeing her wear face paint.

That did not speak to influence, I thought, but with Levantines you never knew.

"The White Knight should here be," the Champion said.

Not a trace of a smile to be found on that face.

"That was not the question asked," Lord Yannu said. "Answer, Lady Rafaella."

The broad-faced woman grimaced.

"Not my placement to argue," she said after a moment.

And that was that. Only she wasn't exactly wrong, I thought. If I was here as representative for the villains, then it would be proper for Hanno to be here for the heroes. That he was not was... interesting. And worrying in some ways. Ishaq wouldn't have the pull for that. I'd thrown him at the lordlings repeatedly during the Wasteland campaign, forcing them to work closely together and share dangers, but while relations there had definitely thawed there were limits. Asking to toss out the Sword of Judgement on his behalf would be crossing those, which meant it was coming from somewhere else. More interesting yet, wherever it had come from enough of the Blood had agreed that it'd actually happened.

We'd all missed some undercurrents in the Dominion.

"Then we are in agreement," Razin said. "And the talks can begin."

He offered me a nod, ceding control of the proceedings. If Procerans had done that I would have hesitated, but Dominion ways were refreshingly blunt. So long as I wasn't too rude, I didn't

have to worry about fucking up some kind of obscure point of etiquette.

"Barrow Sword," I said. "You made a demand of the Blood. State it fully and without deception."

Ishaq's face was calm, but his eyes kept flicking to the others. It was telling. *He doesn't know how this ends*, I thought.

"I ask for my deeds to be added to the Rolls," the Barrow Sword said. "For my honour to be seen as honour in the eyes of others."

Except it wasn't that simple, of course. Sure in theory all he was asking for was to be recognized, but in practice he was asking the Dominion to make him a noble. Not a high-ranking one, more a landed knight than a duke or even a baron, but still very much a noble still. And, there was the pinch, while openly keeping faith to Below. There wasn't a way for him to be on the Rolls and not a noble without the Majilis, the ruling council of Levant, to change the laws of the land. And there was not a way to change those without violating the Liesse Accords, which forbade nations going after villains simply for being villains.

"When this matter was last brought to me, in Hainaut, it was decided that a record of the Barrow Sword's deeds in Hainaut would be sent to the Blood for consideration," I said. "Was this done and was it read?"

Nods all around. Good.

"Now," I said, "before we continue, I require classification. In the absence of a Holy Seljun, are the people in this room – the four sitting members of the Majilis – able to settle this matter lawfully?"

"They are," Aquiline said. "There may be challenge-duels, but our decision will be as law."

"Good," I said. "Then we can continue. The Barrow Sword's request has been aired. Which of you would answer it?"

Some glances were traded, then Lord Yannu spoke up.

"Worthy deeds were done, this is not denied," the Lord of Alava said. "Lord Razin and Lady Aquiline speak to yet more honour being earned out east."

Ah, so that very blunt ploy *had* paid off.

"Yet it remains that you do not keep to the Ashen Gods," he said, "and no man or woman was ever added to the Rolls who kept to the darkness."

I cleared my throat.

"On what basis would you deny him addition to the Rolls, if he has done worthy deeds?" I asked.

That would be where this conversation would make or break, because the Liesse Accords only gave so much give there. If they dug in their heels and said worship of Below was the problem, then this was going to get nasty. Yannu glanced to his left, passing the torch.

"To be Blood is to be more than simply Bestowed," Aquiline said, straight-backed.

I knew that look on her face, I thought. She meant every word of this.

"It is a burden and a blessing, a duty to the Dominion," the Lady of Tartessos. "Through the Founders we inherited the charge of protecting Levant from all that would see it destroyed, and though lesser lines have since sprung they too took up that duty."

A very idealistic way of looking at it, I thought. Mostly Levantine Named stabbed each other, went adventuring in the Brocelian and sometimes joined bands of five wandering the greater continent. When a villain became very famous some of them might try to go and claim their head, as a few had tried with my father after the Conquest, but that was not frequent. Aquiline, though, put a lot of stock in both blood and Blood. She was known as being pretty cutthroat in Levantine politics and supposedly had once almost gotten Razin killed, but that didn't mean she wasn't an idealist in some ways. On the contrary, it meant she was the most dangerous kind: the one with a fucking sword.

Ishaq was visibly itching to talk and the other side had been doing so for a while, so I gesture towards him.

"I have warred in the defence of all Calernia, and done so ably," he said. "What is this, if not protecting Levant?"

It was Razin who spoke up this time, a good sign for the Barrow Sword. Razin was a lot more sentimental than his fiancée, he kept strongly to friendship when it was given. Aquiline was colder, but that wasn't always the right choice. Razin was better at making allies for a reason.

"This question was asked of us, of the Majilis," Lord Razin Tanja said, "and we had no answer. In shunning the Ashen Gods, did you become less a son of Levant? We cannot know your heart, and so cannot speak to that. There is only your deeds to behold, and they speak in favour."

I cocked my head to the side. It sounded like they were going to agree to add him to the Rolls, but they weren't actually going to



do that. It would be a deeply unpopular decision back home and they'd need to allow the same of every villain who came after Ishaq. People who were likely to be a lot less reasonable and controlled than the Barrow Sword was. So what was the workaround?

"There is a lack," Razin said. "Yet it lies not in you, Barrow Sword. It lies in those whose lesser deeds filled pages in the Rolls without ever living up to the charge they inherited. We have lessened what we are for not asking more of those who would stand high among us."

*Ah, I fondly thought. I underestimated you, Razin Tanja. Not just you but your fellows as well. I thought you lot would either bend or break, but you found a way out of it that gives him his dues without breaking what you are.*

"No longer will the Rolls be open to all of the Blood, all who are Bestowed," Razin said. "Only to the worthy, those who prove willing to take up the charge that raises us above others."

"You would make access to the Rolls conditional," I said. "Am I to understand this would be for all of both Blood and Bestowed?"

"It is so," Lord Yannu calmly replied. "It was once the duty of the Isbili to keep the Rolls, but the Isbili are ash. It is the duty of the Majilis now, and so this is our decree: all who would enter the Rolls are to stand before the Majilis and ask for a duty to discharge for the good of all Levant. Only when that duty is fulfilled will one be added to the Rolls."

The four of them and their descendants were going to send all those hotheaded killers, Named and not, to go on glorious adventures. And those that returned, that proved worthy and capable of protecting the Dominion's interests, those few would get to be nobles. They'd not lowered the bar to become one of them, they'd raised it for everyone. Including their own families, so Ishaq had no leg to stand on if he wanted to object. Sure the children from the great families could inherit rule of their territory without being added to the Rolls, the matters weren't legally bound, but if the choice of succession was between someone in those and someone who wasn't?

Yeah, that decision would make itself for most Levantines.

"Do you propose to set such a duty for the Barrow Sword now?" I asked.

"We do," Aquiline said. "And request your arbitration in doing so, that the charge might be fairly chosen."

Meaning they didn't want to get accused of asking something impossible of him so he'd get killed and they wouldn't have to

add him to the Rolls. Fair enough. There was one detail here that might come back to haunt them though.

"You set a precedent in doing so," I warned them. "Those who follow in my wake, bearing my Name, might claim the same right of arbitration I was granted today."

Meaning someone unlikely to be a Levantine might get a say in their affairs, which they were unlikely to like. None of the Blood seemed particularly eager at that, but Ishaq wanted a word.

"I believe in the good faith of all here," he said, "but I won't extend that trust to all those who'll come after you. The Warden spoke it like a warning, but I say it is instead a promise: should those who come in *my* wake be cheated, they will have someone to appeal to."

Ah, cleverly done. If the Warden of the East could be *appealed* to, it implied I wasn't in the room when the duties were given. Which, to be fair, I would not want to be and my successors were likely to feel the same. Levante wasn't where I wanted to spend the rest of my days. No, instead villains would be able to complain to me if they thought the Majilis were being unreasonable. Which was fair, and difficult for the Blood to argue with. They discussed among themselves, but I was given a reluctant agreement. Which took us to the last part of it. Itima Ifriqui broke her silence to offer the first duty that might get the Barrow Sword onto the Rolls.

"Avenge the Grey Pilgrim," the Lady of Vaccei said. "Slay the Dead King."

I almost rolled my eye.

"That sets too high a standard for those who come after him," I said. "Who could match such a deed? It is not reasonable."

The older woman didn't look entirely displeased, though. I wondered what it was she'd actually been after. Was she softening me up for another ask, or had she just tried her luck at making it pretty much impossible for anyone to ever be added to the Rolls again? Razin suggested killing a Revenant, but it was considered too easy by the others. Aquiline instead suggested that one of the Scourge be slain, and that resonated with the others. It was, Yannu noted, not dissimilar to asking the slaying of a champion from a nation the Dominion was at war with. Honestly I thought it was a little costly, and unlikely to be matched by most who'd follow Ishaq, but he pulled me close.

"I would agree to the terms," he murmured.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Could lower them, I think," I told him.

"I am to be the first, Black Queen," Ishaq smiled, showing teeth. "The honour I earn must be beyond question. I break the path for those who come after."

I studied him, making sure he was certain, and when I was satisfied I drew back. It'd do.

"These are good terms," I said. "I have no objection to them."

Good humour all around, save for the Valiant Champion who had been seated at the right end of the table and not spoken a word all this time.

"Though I am pleased with what was done here," I idly said, "is there a particular reason the matter had to be brought to me this way?"

Rafaella laughed, a harsh bark.

"Fool," the Champion said. "You help them, you be part of it. Now you have to make Hanno and Grand Alliance accept it for them."

Shit, I thought. I always hated it, when someone I despised was right.

## Chapter 32: Claimant (Redux)

*"Love is a powerful thing, Chancellor, but it only moves you when it is threatened. Hate is ever the bloody spur of progress."*

– Dread Emperor Vindictive II

"Not that I'm complaining," I said, "but I'm not sure that counts as tea."

The First Prince emptied the bottom of the flask into my cup, leaving it filled almost to the brim with the pale liquor she'd called *bergmilch*. My Reitz mostly wasn't, but I was pretty sure it meant something like 'mountain milk'.

"There are tea leaves at the bottom, Catherine," Cordelia serenely said. "Ashuran greenleaf. It adds a bittersweet tang to the taste."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Didn't take you for the liquor type," I said. "Much less going for exotic stuff."

"I am not," the fair-haired princess admitted. "It was my mother's favourite drink."

I hummed. It was rare for Cordelia to speak much of herself during our little talks and even rarer for there to be a mention of her family. Rumour had it she was fiercely protective of her cousin, the Augur, and had been like a daughter to her uncle Klaus Papenheim. I'd only met Agnes Hasenbach the once and been closely supervised by her all the while, which put true to half the talk, but I'd only ever known the Iron Prince as keeping some distance from Salia and his niece. Her mother and father, though, I'd heard almost nothing about save their names and causes of death as written in ledgers. Going by the dates her father had died while she was very young and her mother while she was still shy of womanhood.

Even royalty had a way of dying early, in Lycaonese lands.

"Must have been expensive to get the tea leaves all the way up to Rhenia," I mused.

"Princess Mathilda gave her a large bag as a wedding gift when she wed my father," Cordelia said, eyes faraway. "They were close friends as girls, rode together against the Plague."

That'd be Mathilda Greensteel, I thought, the Princess of Neustria who'd died at the Battle of Hainaut. The Hawk had gotten her. I'd not known the woman all that well, having dealt mostly with Princes Klaus instead, but she'd been popular with her soldiers and fairly pleasant in war councils. Still, it was strange to think that all these people I'd only ever known as allies against the Dead King, soldiers sharing my war, had lived entire lives before we crossed paths. That there'd been invisible ties between people I knew I'd never even thought might exist. I leaned forward in my seat, tasting of the drink, and hummed in pleasant surprise.

Creamy and a little sugary for my tastes, but the tea *did* add a pleasing twist to it.

"Your mother had good taste," I complimented.

Cordelia laughed.

"Mother had absolutely *horrid* taste, Catherine," the blue-eyed princess denied. "Her notion of a ballroom dress was rabbit fur lining instead of bear, and she was obsessed with cabbage soup. She had tried one in a Lyonis roadside inn that she insisted was the finest soup ever wrought by mortal hands, so the poor cooks had to try a different recipe once every month."

She was smiling, I thought, more genuinely than I'd ever seen her. Her eyes still had that distance to them, almost dreaminess,

but there was joy on her face as I'd rarely seen in the First Prince of Procer. What kind of a life she must live, I thought, that she found more to smile among the dead than the living. Best to change the subject, perhaps. I squinted at her.

"So that's why you're so tall," I accused. "Years of cabbage soup."

A glint of amusement in her eyes.

"Our family physician used to tell me fish made people short," she idly informed me. "Something about their oils and the Gods having cursed them to live on their bellies."

"I didn't even eat that much fish," I noted. "Bread and soup in the morning, meat and beans once a week and fish from the docks whenever it was under a silver the pound."

She looked at me in fascination, which might have been interesting in different circumstances but in these served to remind me that Cordelia Hasenbach had never been anything but royalty. She'd been born to rule, and her silver spoon might not have been quite as silvery as those of southern princes but no piece of it had ever been broken off to buy fish.

"Besides, fish oils? Ridiculous," I snorted. "Everybody knows it's horse meat that does it. Atrophies the muscles, you know, bunches you up like a goblin."

I was joking, but it was an old and common superstition. It was bad luck to eat a horse, even at war.

"Your people and horses," Cordelia drily said, "have a most interesting relationship."

"Please, like you Lycaonese won't slap a wolf onto anything given half a pretext," I snorted. "I once saw a soldier from Hannover use a laundry stick with a wolfhead on it."

He'd gone after that tent cloth like it owed him money, half the reason I even remembered it.

"I am told," Cordelia said, arching an eyebrow, "that Callowans do not eat poultry when geese are flying overhead."

I glared at her. That was only once a year, when they headed back north to Daoine after winter.

"The soul might go up and entreat its cousins to vengeance," I replied, a tad defensively.

She eyed me a long moment, then her lips quirked.

"If a woman eats a billy goat on the last day of the year, a son born in the new year will have horns," Cordelia shared.

I let out a low whistle, impressed. I sometimes forgot that Cordelia Hasenbach wasn't Proceran because there was really no such thing as a 'Proceran', practically speaking. She was a Lycaonese princess who'd adopted many of the ways of her southern subjects to better ruler them, but it wouldn't do to forget she'd been born far from the places she now ruled. Places now all fallen to the Dead King, even if many Lycaonese had fled south to temporary safety. The King of Death's long shadow once more soured my mood, bringing me back to the tasks at hand.

"My thanks for the tea," I said, "but we will have to spoil it by talking of grimmer things as it is drunk, I think."

"The curse of all affairs, these days," the First Prince sighed. "I assume you have read the terms as proposed by the dwarves?"

I made myself drink. It was either that or cursing and I'd already lost my temper in front of her once today. The silver cup went down and I licked my lower lip clean of a droplet of creamy liquor.

"I did," I said, tightly controlled. "They're not asking for the entire barony of Holden, just a few miles of land around, but that's already bad enough. It's coppers to the gold they're asking for Penthes and Creusens."

Holden would barely qualify as a city in Procer, barely fifteen thousand people lived there. The amount of land needed to feed them was nowhere as much as a city the size of Penthes or the capital of Creusens would. The Kingdom Under had, accordingly, demanded much more of their surrounding countryside.

"They want Penthes for the water," Cordelia said. "That is my conclusion. They want the trade up the Wasaliti and access to the sea. Dwarves do not sail, but they will have a large population of human subjects to draw on for the work."

"Creusens so they get the western roads that go all the way down to the Dominion," I said. "And Holden for Callow. That's one a weaker gain for them, all things considered."

"They want Callowan grain," the First Prince said. "Though I would not be surprised if they began tunnelling through the Whitecaps within moments of owning Holden. A pass through the mountains would open eastern Procer to them."

And do so right at the height of some of the richest parts of the heartlands of the Principate – Cantal and Iserre – which also happened to be regions of Procer the Dead King hadn't reached yet. They wanted their finger on the pulse of the surface trade.

"This is a foothold," I bluntly said. "They're looking upwards."

"In the long term," Cordelia noted. "The preoccupation with commerce implies that in the immediate they will seek to consolidate their gains underground. A massive undertaking, one that would be made much easier should they have unrestricted access to all our markets."

They'd hit us up for resources, food and cattle and wood, and when they'd drained us to expand their empire they'd turn their gaze in our direction. They weren't even being subtle about this, though from where they stood I supposed they didn't *need* to be. What we were going to do about it, let the Dead King kill us out of spite? We had no real leverage on the Kingdom Under to speak of.

"I'm not comfortable with kicking that problem down the line to our successor," I said. "Look, I know that first we need to be able to *have* successors-"

"I absolutely agree," Cordelia cut in. "I do not need to be sold on this, Catherine. I would have swallowed being taken advantage of in a time of crisis, as indeed the Principate has done to other nations many a time. It would have been legitimate, if infuriating. This, however, is beyond reason."

Tension left my shoulders some. Hasenbach was arguably more farsighted than me in many regards, but Procer's back was a lot more against the wall than mine. I'd been afraid that it might make her inclined to folding whatever the terms, figuring that anything was better than annihilation.

"I wouldn't be able to sell it back home anyway," I admitted. "Even if Vivienne backed me, which I'm not sure she would, a lot of my people would rather see everything west of the Whitecaps burn rather than surrender a city."

"My grip on Creusens is loose at best," Cordelia replied. "And I would lose all influence should I agree to these terms. No doubt they are aware of both these facts. Their interest is in having the signature, the right. They will then have leave to exercise it at their leisure."

A pretext to swing at us if we didn't roll over whenever they got around to taking control, huh.

"That makes more sense than them expecting us to be able to surrender those cities right now," I admitted. "I'd figured they might expect us to keep the treaty a secret until the war was at an end, but if they're mostly after the signature that explains why they're comfortable pushing so hard."

Cordelia nodded in agreement.

"Though that does raise an interesting question," she said. "Why would the Kingdom Under need such an excuse in the first place?"

I sipped at my drink, considering that very thing. I had never particularly got the impression that the dwarves were more than slightly wary of surface powers, and only distantly worried about the prospect of a unified front emerging to face them. Which meant it wasn't about us at all.

"They want it to overcome internal problems," I murmured. "The Herald is an expansionist, but his faction might not have the pull to just drag the Kingdom Under into war with the surface without something solid to brandish as a pretext."

Like a treaty promising three cities that was never fulfilled and which Cordelia and I's successors might not be all that interested in honouring after the horror of the Dead King had passed.

"It might also be that a war of unprovoked aggression against us would be unpopular with their commons," Cordelia noted, "but I share your conclusion. Which is good news in the sense that it shows their position is not as strong as they have been pretending."

"If we had another interlocutor on the dwarven side we could try to go around them," I suggested.

"It might cause the very sort of diplomatic incident that would sink our chances," the blonde princess replied. "I am not dismissing the idea outright, but we should acknowledge the risk."

I grimaced. Yeah, it might be the dwarves would react very poorly to even the perception of us uppity humans trying to play their internal factions against each other.

"I'm not seeing a lot of other options on the table," I said. "We don't have a lot to bargain with."

Cordelia smiled.

"I have heard diplomacy compared to a game of shatranj, Catherine, but it always struck me as weak comparison," the First Prince of Procer idly said. "I have found cards a much more fitting game."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm not great lover of shatranj comparisons," I said, "but I'll bite. How are cards the better fit?"

"Because at cards there are two ways to win," Cordelia said. "By reading the cards, and by reading the players."



My brow rose even further.

"You think the Herald is their weak point?" I asked. "I might be able to take him in a brawl, Hasenbach, but it'd not be an easy ride. I'm pretty sure that unpleasant type that gets stronger the longer they're kicking around."

"Use of force here would be a defeat already," she said. "What draws my eye here, Catherine, is that you told me this Herald was appointed as the head of the Fourteenth Expansion."

I nodded.

"Which must have been a feather in his cap after I mediated Sve Noc's withdrawal," I said.

"Indeed," Cordelia agreed. "And his influence must have further spread with the success of this Fifteenth Expansion, the ring of fortresses around Keter. Yet both of these are massive, generational works rather far from finished."

I cocked my head to the side, following her line of thought.

"So why is he *here*?" I murmured.

My first thought was that he'd dealt with me before so he was a good fit, but that was the wrong way of looking at this. For a surface nation, in all humility that'd be a valid reason to choose a diplomat if it were certain I'd be part of the talks. I had enough power and influence to warrant that. But for the *Kingdom Under* to make its choice because of that reason? No, that would be hubris. I was not nearly important or powerful enough for the dwarves to bend their politics around me.

"If these talks are viewed as important," I slowly said, "then his appointment might be a reward for those two successes."

"There is likely a degree of that," Cordelia considered, "but it seems backwards to my eye. Why reward success at the frontier by a diplomatic assignment in the heartlands? Especially when the work is not finished. No, Catherine, I don't believe he was appointed to this assignment at all."

I frowned.

"You're betting he fought to get the position," I sussed out.

"That is my instinct," the First Prince agreed. "And there may lay our lifeline."

"If he burned favours to get this position, it's to get something out of it," I said. "So if we figure out what..."

"Then by finding a way to deny it, we gain leverage," Cordelia finished.

How many people in all of Calernia, I wondered, would have been able to figure this much out from less than an hour sitting across from the dwarven envoys? A handful at most, I thought, and most of them long dead. It was easy to look at the way that Procer had spent the last few years breaking apart and take from the sight the lesson that the First Prince was not so skillful a woman as her reputation implied, but that was looking at it the wrong way. Cordelia Hasenbach was the very reason the place had spent years crumbling in good order instead of brutally snapping after six months.

It would not do to forget how dangerous this woman actually was.

"I don't even have a decent guess at what he might be after," I said.

"I have some notions, but I would not venture them in haste," she mused. "Best to let time pass and consider the possibilities with a rested mind and the help of advisors."

I conceded with a nod. I wasn't sure it would help, but given that I was currently drawing a blank there was no harm in trying. We weren't supposed to meet with the envoys again for a few days anyway.

"You'd think with our armies routed on every front there'd be less of this song and dance," I sighed. "But ever since I've set foot in Salia it has been all schemes and politics."

"Indeed?" Cordelia idly said. "Then which of these did your luncheon with the Blood happen to be?"

I rolled my eye at her.

"You could at least *pretend* you're not spying on me," I reproached.

"We came by that information coincidentally, I assure you," Cordelia politely lied.

I weighed my options for a moment. I'd need to get her on board with what the Blood wanted anyway, and there was no real point in not beginning those talks now. My only reason to hesitate was that the matter smelled to me like a pivot. So did this business with the dwarves, for that matter. While it might be true that I was leaning Cordelia's way in the matter of the Warden of the West, giving her the first bite at two pivots out of – well, I couldn't be sure but three was usually a safe bet – might be seen as openly backing a horse in that race. *If I bring in Hanno quickly enough it shouldn't matter*, I finally decided. Both

issues were large enough that a single night of forewarning wouldn't make all that much of a difference.

"I was invited to mediate a dispute between the Blood and the Barrow Sword," I said.

She straightened in her seat.

"The request to be added to the Rolls," the First Prince immediately replied. "They agreed?"

"In a manner of speaking," I hedged.

I laid out the compromise that'd been reached out for her. That Ishaq as well as all Bestowed and of the Blood after him would need to undertake a trial assigned by the Majilis to be added to the Rolls, that the Barrow Sword's in particular would be the slaying of a Scourge. And she knew, without my needing to spell it out, that by mediating the solution I had tacitly endorsed it – and so it was now on me to sell it to the Grand Alliance and whoever ended up filling the seat of Warden of the West. Because whoever that was would very much need to consent. If villainous Bestowed could appeal to the Warden of the East over unfairness by the Majilis, then it became necessary that heroic Bestowed would have the same right of appeal to the Warden of the West. If they refused to take up that duty, then it would sink the entire compromise by making it unacceptably uneven.

I had wondered, in private, if that was not Itima Ifriqui's gamble here. Her silence had not betrayed open dislike of the arrangements, but it had certainly not been a strong endorsement. She might have been hoping this entire affair would collapse without the Blood ever taking the blame for it, keeping good relations with myself and Ishaq without needing to actually let him into the Rolls.

"Ah," Cordelia murmured, eyes glinting with interest. "An interesting manoeuvre on their part. It solidifies the power of the Majilis by taking over a responsibility that used to belong to the Pilgrim's Blood. They are aware of the risks of Levant splintering and acting boldly to prevent it by filling the hole left by the end of the Isbili."

"It's also a way to harness Named in ways that will be useful for the Dominion," I said. "Which I don't particularly mind, so long as it doesn't get out of hand."

If anything, it'd serve as a check on the excesses of more powerful Named. If you wanted to get onto the Rolls you'd need to at least not irreparably piss off the four most powerful people in Levant, which ought to provide a measure of restraint.

"I do find it fascinating that you speak of Named as oxen best put to harness when you are one yourself," Cordelia said, studying me.

"Most of us aren't all that more powerful than other people in most circumstances," I said. "It's the tenth that has too much power and too little sense that needs checking. I can live with another Fields of Streges, but I will not leave behind a world where another Folly would be tolerated."

"Arguably you are of the tenth," the First Prince calmly said.

"So I am," I frankly replied. "And I have done monstrous things, I won't pretend otherwise. Were I facing another woman like me instead of standing in her boots, I would want her dead."

I snorted.

"And that's why we'll have Wardens," I said. "One in the East and one in the West. To curtail the worst of both sides, to keep the Game of the Gods a matter for the Gods and Named."

"The proposal of the Dominion would grant the offices more authority than that," Cordelia said. "It would allow either Warden to overturn a decision made by the ruling council of Levant."

"Only regarding Named, and not even in a general sense," I argued. "The right of appeal would be specifically over the matter of the assigned trial."

"It sets the precedent of an authority standing above nations regardless," Cordelia said. "And puts that power squarely in the hand of a pair of Named."

She wasn't wrong, I grimly thought. I wouldn't be able to assign a trial of my own to another villain, but it was pretty much giving me right of veto on a decision that'd be made by literally the four most powerful people of Levant. The thing was, I was comfortable with that principle. I liked the idea of being able to step in if the Majilis were shafting a villain for no good reason, and the more subtle power that there would be in *not* stepping in should they assign something suicidal to a truly horrid Named. But that comfort came from being raised in a land where Named had the run of the roost: Good Kings and Dread Empresses, Black Knights and Shining Princes.

Cordelia had not been raised in such a land and she did not share the comfort. Procer was the land of the Highest Assembly, but also the realm where people taking to the streets could end a prince. Where priests had told royalty their wars must be just or never waged at all, where Named were honoured but never allowed to *rule*.

"It grants Named power over Named," I replied. "And only influence beyond that where it intersects with more earthly powers. The Principate would not be affected."

"I have not sold the Kingdom Under three cities for salvation, Catherine," she gently said. "Why would I then sell you all of Calernia for the same?"

Yeah, I'd been afraid of that answer. Pragmatic as she was, Cordelia was no less an idealist than Hanno. It just showed in different places. If she had no principles she held to, I thought, she likely wouldn't have been in the running for Warden in the first place. Above had little love for those without conviction. The Sword of Judgement, I thought, would not so much as bat an eye before accepting the deal I'd laid out. Of course he wouldn't. Hanno had broken with me – with us – when defending the independence of heroes in the face of what he saw as encroachment by the Principate. To him, giving that power to the Wardens would only be a natural extension of what we'd begun with the Truce and Terms.

"The days where I could worry first of Procer are coming to an end," Cordelia said, finger tracing the rim of her cup. "I have worried and worried until it all came to ash, and I regret not a moment of that. Yet I will not slip into the depths of my grief and drown. If these are the end of days, I will spend my last trying to leave behind a better world than I was born to."

"We've been leaving the duty of checking Named to kings and emperors for centuries," I said. "Millennia, even. It hasn't *worked*. Maybe you can pretend otherwise in Procer, where so few of the great monsters rise, but that's not a luxury Callowans and Praesi ever had. There needs to be a check, Cordelia."

"And so you would hand the keys of the madhouse to the mad?" she smiled.

"Is that really," I said, "something someone trying to become one of the mad should say?"

I saw no point in trying to pretend this was not a conversation about her being Warden of the West just as much as it was about my talks with the Dominion. Maybe even more the former than the latter.

"If it must be done," she quietly said, "let it be done right. Let us not unleash a creeping calamity on our children and their children after them."

I gestured curtly, irritated at the implication I'd want that unleashed.

"I hear much disapproval," I said, "but little alternative."

"Keep the Wardens out of it," Cordelia said. "Let the hopefuls be given the right to appoint an advocate when seeking a trial that can serve the same purpose as the Warden would have. Better yet, let the hopeful and the Majilis agree on an impartial arbiter should there be disagreement. The power does not *need* to be in your hands, Catherine."

She met my eye with her blue ones, unflinching.

"It is simply where you prefer it to be."

I tamped down on the flash of anger. Instead of leaning into it I made myself consider what she'd proposed. It was, I thought, our differences laid bare. Cordelia Hasenbach, the princess who believed in good and rightful rule, in the might of laws and the virtues of order. Me, I recognized the power in those but I just didn't trust them the way she did. She'd been born on the good side of them, but I'd not had that luck. My world had been a crooked city watch and a governor strangling his city, an occupying army more likely to give the people a fair shake than our own guilds. So when I had the choice between putting the power in the hands of a Role instead of a pack of greedy princes and their descendants, the choice was clear.

Cordelia believed the Majilis and the arbiters would do right by the people, because she believed that good governance was the rule and corrupt rule the aberration. I believed the same lot would fuck it all up because that was what people *did*, when they got to wield power without having earned it the hard way. So she put her faith in the Blood, and I put mine in the Wardens.

I didn't argue with her. There would be no point, not when where we came from was so fundamentally apart. I could sense, dimly, that this was it. The bone that we would spend our lives picking if she ended up in the seat opposite mine, the prize we'd be fencing over so long as we had blades: where power ought to lie, between kingdoms and Named. So it would not do, I thought, to begin this half-heartedly. If she was going to lay her claim, to draw her line in the sand mirroring my own, then it must be done properly. Let her speak her words and Creation hear them, that she might stand or fall on the merit of her convictions.

"And what is it, Cordelia Hasenbach, that you would make of the Warden of the West?"

She felt it too, I could see it in her eyes. In the way that pale face hardened, those cool blue eyes burning with the same implacable that had once seen her refuse a Name. Her fingers touched a small bracelet hidden in her sleeve, a simple slip of leather set with sharp teeth. I saw them dig into the skin of her wrist, like an apple about to be bit, and she straightened to her full height as tresses fell down her back like a shower of gold.

"The First Prince of the Chosen," Cordelia claimed. "The court of their justice, their captain in the war against ruin. And when that is not enough, when right bends and the way is lost, the wielder of the blade of mercy."

The world shivered and I with it. And somehow, somewhere, I heard it begin. A flicked thumb, the coin going up. Spinning, spinning, spinning.

Gods help us all when it landed.

## Chapter 33: Claimant (Repeat)

*"Eighty-three: while it is true that tiger pits and acid floors are generally laughable, that does not mean they stop being lethal when stumbled into. Ludicrous does not equate harmless."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

I'd had enough to drink that I didn't want to head to bed immediately.

I could have burned out the last bits of inebriation with my Name – and what a luxury it was, that I could do that again – but I preferred leaving things to run their natural course. It did things to your mind to habitually ignore your body's limits. Whether it was no longer sleeping or going from drunk to sober in a heartbeat, I suspected that the more Named estranged themselves from their mortal foundation the more their Name gained purchase on them. You couldn't use that power constantly, bathe in it, without being changed by it in turn. Better to grow used to the occasional bout of patience instead, even when it felt like all the world was running out of time.

The palace had beautiful gardens, one of which the servants had called a 'night garden' in Alamans, and curiosity drove me to limp my way down that very path. The air was fresh but pleasantly without bite, which made the stroll a pleasant enough way to let the last of the drink fade away. Like so many beautiful things in this beautiful city, the night garden was a work of art. Small glass lanterns in purple and blue had been lit, revealing perfectly cut green grass and low hedges. The paths were circular, half-hidden by deep flowerbeds in wine red and golden yellow. They led to a gazebo that was all wrought iron.

Even the chairs, which seemed made entirely out of a single exquisitely folded piece of iron wire. The skill that must have taken attracted my eye just as much as the plush cushion someone had laid out on it, which spoke sweet nothings to my aching leg. Sitting at that low table with the dwarves this morning had taken a toll and the herbal brew I'd drunk only worked for so long. I

still took the time to enjoy the strolls before sitting under the gazebo's roof, looking out over the edge of the garden and onto the still-lit streets of distant Salia. I'd laid my staff against one of the iron pillars, but that didn't mean I was unarmed.

When I felt the attention settle on me like a pinprick between my shoulder blades, I discreetly flicked my wrist under the table and felt my knife, *the* knife, fill my palm. I pricked my ear to try to pick up on the footsteps, but what I heard instead was a sigh.

"Fresh back to the Name, and already you've picked up all your old tricks," Vivienne said. "It's a mite unfair, I must say."

"Fair is for children," I quoted, watching as she came into view.

Slinking out of the shadow with the grace of the thief she had been for many years, Vivienne Dartwick did not cut a figure so different as before she had taken up her Name. She had grown no taller since becoming the Princess, and though perhaps the cut of her chin was a sliver sharper and her eyes grown a little more grey than blue, I could point to no other visible change. It was just in the way she carried who she was. The milkmaid braid on which her circlet rested could no longer be thought of as anything but a crown, and the calm she had found while I trawled the depths of the Everdark had gained... weight. Gravity. She no longer needed to frown to look serious, it was something she wore as much as her clothes.

"We're in a pleasant mood, I see," Vivienne drawled, drawing back the chair across from mine before sitting. "Did it go that badly with Hasenbach?"

I grimaced.

"It went well enough," I said. "She pushed back on the Dominion's proposal, but she did it in a way that can't possibly be seen as Procer meddling in their affairs – she's making sure they have more power, if anything."

Not that a diplomat of her calibre would have made so elementary a mistake.

"So it's the grass under your feet she wants to cut," Vivienne mused. "Not exactly a surprise, Catherine. She's been an advocate for keeping Named away from the levers of power since the start, and the Wardens as you're pushing them have their hands on more than a few."

I grunted, waving it away. I wasn't interested in going over my talks with Hasenbach when they were still so fresh. Better to divorce myself from the moment first, let the emotions calm.



"You were looking for me?" I probed.

She nodded.

"I've received reports," Vivienne said. "Masego and the Rogue Sorcerer sent word."

My eye narrowed.

"And?"

"They've 'proved the fundamental principles behind their theory to a satisfactory extent'," the Princess quoted. "Which is a relief, I'll admit. I don't see a way for us to win the war without setting loose Below's stories."

*Neither do I*, I thought.

"If they proved the principles it just means that Zeze's theory that the Bard is muting Below's stories is true," I said instead. "Not that they've figured out how to undo the muting. Did they get any further?"

She shook her head. Not good news, then, but far from bad news.

"Reports, plural," I invited.

She half-smiled.

"The Severance is in the city," Vivienne said. "Unless Hanno has another artefact that needs to be carried around in a sealed enchanted coffin."

"Official correspondence did mention he'd sent for it," I noted. "Best to have it here, I agree, with the Arsenal being closed."

"I thought I'd mention it," Vivienne idly said, "because an old acquaintance is on his way to Salia as well. Christophe de Pavanie was seen on the main northern road, summoned south."

I drummed my fingers against the iron table, the cacophonous clang of it oddly satisfying.

"Let me guess," I mused. "The Jacks also caught sight of the Blade of Mercy and the Bloody Sword obeying the same sort of summons."

She smirked, I sighed. With the Valiant Champion already in the city, that meant all the heroes most likely to be able to survive wielding the Severance were soon to be gathered in Salia. Hanno was looking to settle who was to wield it, I thought. And he'd decided to spring that on me without warning. *Anyone but a hero touching that sword will lose their hand and maybe their head with it*, I reminded myself. *He might not have seen it as*

*something to warn me of because no villains can be considered candidates.* I'd be brought in when the decision was to be made, not for the footwork. Or so the most charitable spin I could put on this went.

"I'm not pleased he's looking to surprise me," I admitted.

Vivienne studied me a long moment, loose-limbed but sharp-eyed.

"You sound almost resigned," she finally said. "Like you're preparing to make your peace with that and a hundred more insults."

"There need to be a Warden of the West," I sighed.

"And it's either Prince White or Princess Blue, yes," Vivienne frowned. "Yet they're both in the running for the prize, as I understand it. So why does it sound like you think Hanno already has the bird in hand?"

"We need to win the war, Viv," I quietly said. "And I like Hasenbach for the peace, I genuinely do, but I don't think she's the woman to get us to it. Indrani was right when she put it to me: when we hit Keter, it's the Sword of Judgement we'll want leading the charge on those walls. Not the First Prince."

I believed, honestly, that for all my differences with her Cordelia might make the better Warden of the West. She was better suited to the role in a world where the Liesse Accords had been signed. But now that I'd walked away from the room where I had shared a drink with her, I could see the... fragility in her candidature. Cordelia was too bound to Procer and its ugly games, was not respected as a military leader and most of all she knew too little of namelore. The Book of Some Things might help there, I thought, but giving it to either claimant would be an open endorsement on my part. Something I was rather hesitant to risk.

"Indrani's smarter than she pretends," Vivienne finally said, "but she still thinks through Refuge."

I cocked my head to the side.

"I don't follow," I said.

"It's about the individual for her," the Princess said. "What they can personally do. That's enough to assess most Named, and I think she's sharper than either of us when it comes to reading people, but it doesn't apply to something like the Warden of the West."

"They're in opposition, Viv," I pointed out. "They bring different things to the table, and when one is chosen what the

other would have brought is lost. It's the same as when I became the Squire, only with more politics and a lot less stabbing."

"You're underestimating the both of them," Vivienne bluntly replied. "They aren't *villains*, Cat. They're too proud to take a loss easy, either of them, but this doesn't end with a tantrum or a corpse. If Hasenbach takes the Name, you still have the Sword of Judgement leading the charge against the walls of Keter. He'll just be doing it at her order."

My lips thinned. My experiences might have coloured my understanding of this, I thought, she was right there. But she was giving too sunny a shine to the whole affair.

"That's not how pivots work," I replied, shaking my head. "If you don't really lose anything by the choice then there's no weight and it's not a pivot in the first place. Something's at stake, Vivienne. Maybe we won't see it immediately, but the choices we make always come back to haunt us."

Two Wardens, I thought, and the Dead King. Trying to end the Hidden Horror and use his bones as the foundation of a new age. That story would not end the same way for Hanno and Cordelia, my instincts told me. It felt like I was trying to catch a fish swimming underwater, seeing only the faintest hint of a quick-moving thing in the dark. I was afraid, I could admit it in the privacy of my own mind, that making the wrong choice here might lose us the war long before we ever saw the walls of Keter.

"Fate will not change their character," Vivienne quietly said. "Don't throw away the peace for fear of losing the war, Catherine."

I drew back in genuine surprise.

"You think it should be the First Prince," I said, taken aback.

My friend had never been all that fond of Cordelia Hasenbach, and though there was respect there it had always been tempered by the memory of the Tenth Crusade and who had instigated it.

"Even for the war, it should be her," Vivienne said. "We've plenty of people who can lead the charge, Catherine, you not least among them. What the Grand Alliance is though, what the armies being led against Keter will be, is a continent-wide coalition."

She paused, choosing her words.

"Most of the nations involved have been at war with each other in the last decade," the Princess said. "Leadership will not just be swords and hope, it will be keeping the army from collapsing under the weight of its own feuds. Hanno of Arwad is respected,

and even beloved by some, but charisma will not be enough to keep the wheels from coming off the cart after we take our first few punches in the stomach. His way is to lead by example, but what we're going to *need* is someone who can bring disparate forces together, wrangle and move them."

And it was not the Sword of Judgement, she did not need to say, that had spent the last decade and a half doing that with notable skill. The Grand Alliance wasn't something I'd made, after all, it was something I'd joined. I hummed, eyes returning to the distant lights. She wasn't wrong. Not entirely right, either, but her words rang true.

"It is all wind before I've seen Hanno," I finally said.

This was too far-reaching of a decision for me to make it in haste. But if I did end up choosing a favourite... well, there were ways to nudge while mitigating the risk. Like, for example, giving the same boon to both while knowing one would benefit more than other. Vivienne softly laughed, drawing my attention. She was looking almost wistfully at the city.

"Even five years ago," she said, "who would have thought we'd ever sit here? Scheming the fate of nations, dreaming a new order."

"We've come a long way," I smiled, "since the Thief and the Squire."

And, I realized in a moment of aching clarity, those same paths would eventually see us part. After the war, should we win, she would reign in Callow and I would sit in Cardinal. I'd have to leave the kingdom for years, I knew that. Too many people would look to me over Vivienne for orders otherwise, no matter who wore the crown, and she must have the change to begin her reign without standing deep in my shadow. My smile turned bitter as we stared out at the city. It was not the last night we would sit like this, scheming and dreaming, but time was running out.

Sometimes I feared the peace more than the war.

—

Cordelia Hasenbach had called me to palaces, but I found Hanno of Arwad in a small farm.

It'd seen better days, the paint on the wooden shutters flanking, but it was not there that my eye lingered. The muddy path led me around the house to a cattle-wall, one shoddily made. More stacked stones than anything, and unsurprisingly large swaths of it had collapsed over the last two winters. A tall man was kneeling in the dirt, the sleeves of his grey tunic rolled up to the elbows as he stacked the stones anew. Hanno of Arwad was tall

and built like a working man, muscled and calloused. The fingers he'd lost to the Severance had been severed at the phalange, leaving stumps, and he had to be careful when gripping with them.

He must have heard me coming, since I'd been hailed by soldiers in a mix of colours – Brabant and fantassins, mostly – before getting anywhere near the farm, but he kept working as I hoisted myself up on one of the parts of the wall that still stood. We'd been here before. I had first met him here at this very farm, though it had been night and instead of a white cloak hanging on the rusty hook outside the house it had been a lantern. There was another change, though, one that surprised me. As Hanno stacked the stones, he reached for a wooden bucket at his side. Wielding a spade with surprisingly skill, he slathered mortar between the stones as he rebuilt the wall.

The barest trace of a smile quirked my lips. That first night, in the dead of winter, he'd just been stacking the stones again. I'd warned him that it wouldn't stick without mortar, that he was wasting his time. Say what you would about Hanno of Arwad, but he was not one to repeat his mistakes. I waited as he finished a row, settling the stones in the mortar carefully. When the spade went back into the bucket, at last I cocked an eyebrow and spoke up.

"So, is it me or you *definitely* used Recall to pick up some masonry?" I teased.

A small laugh as he rose to his feet, dusting the dirt off his knees. The Sword of Judgement was more than simply tanned, darker in skin than a Taghreb but still short of the Soninke. His mother had been one, he'd told me, but his father had been Ashuran. Hanno's brown eyes had always given off a sense of steadiness, all the more reassuring when paired with his plain but honest face, but while they still did there was something missing now. The calm, I thought, that'd always lurked beneath. The serenity born of certainty. It was gone.

His gaze, I thought, was warmer for it.

"I asked the Sculptor," Hanno told me. "He spent half an hour reminding me he is an artist and not a mason, but he had some very useful advice about mortar anyhow. Good man."

He wasn't. The Arlesite was very much one of mine. Murdering the woman who'd killed his wife had been somewhat excusable, sacrificing half a dozen people to animate the impossibly lifelike statue of her he'd sculpted significantly less so. He probably did know his way around the mason trade, though, I wouldn't deny that part.

"He is certainly a man," I casually answered, then cast a scrutinizing look at the wall.

Hanno smiled.

"And?"

"Won't be holding back a Crab anytime soon," I said, "but it looks solid. Should hold."

He looked pleased.

"I have been meaning to repay the lending of this house," Hanno said. "A few afternoons of work and I should have the entire wall back up."

I snorted.

"Do make your guests help," I suggested. "You're bound to be swimming in nobles by now and I'd pay good silver to see their like kneel in the dirt."

"A fine idea," Hanno said.

His eyes were amused, I noticed.

"You can hang your cloak over mine, if you'd like," the dark-skinned hero continued.

Ah, I grimly thought, the classic Callowan blunder. Shot in the foot by my own spite. I coughed.

"I have a bad leg," I argued. "Surely you wouldn't make a sickly maiden like myself kneel."

He eyed me consideringly, as if deciding whether or not he wanted to unpack any of that.

"You can hold the bucket," Hanno finally said.

"Eh, I'll take it," I shrugged.

It was pretty heavy, so naturally I cheated. I put my staff across my shoulders and hung it off the edge, moving around the angle until it was easier to bear. Hanno looked more amused than anything, beginning to work again as we talked.

"Rafaella tells me you've helped the Blood come to terms with the Barrow Sword," Hanno said.

His hands moved deftly to spread the mortar, but I knew better than to think that meant he was not listening to my words.

"It's a little larger than that," I said. "But it went well, I would say. They've kept what matters to them while giving Ishaq and the others enough rope."

"Rope?" Hanno asked.

"Rope," I repeated. "Whether he uses it to hang himself for pull himself up is for him to decide. Either way, he has his shot now."

The short-haired hero – it was cut even closer than last time I'd seen him, barely more than stubble – let out a noise of agreement.

"It is a reasonable compromise," Hanno said. "And holds all those who would enter the Rolls to a higher standard, which the true gain of it all as far as I'm concerned."

"Are you?" I asked.

He paused, turning to meet my eye.

"Concerned, that is," I elaborated.

A moment passed.

"You wield ambiguousness as deftly as Tariq ever did," Hanno finally replied, which was not entirely a compliment. "It was fairly bargained and no law was bent. I would have liked to be seated at the table, but I understand why I was not."

"That is your own doing, Prince White," I mildly said.

His growing conflict with the First Prince was, I had come to suspect, why he'd not been invited. The Blood liked him, I knew that well. As was only natural considering he was a famous warrior, Bestowed and the Tribunal's own champion. But Cordelia had done much for them, and they had sworn oaths of alliance to her. It would have toed the line of dishonour to turn on her now and bringing in Hanno would have been an endorsement of him. Too close to betrayal for comfort, I figured. He'd begun working again, but at my words his movement stuttered.

"You disapprove?"

A simple question, calmly asked. It carried more weight than any two words should bear. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, balancing the bucket against my shoulders.

"Haven't decided yet," I said.

Which was, if nothing else, true. His hands began moving again.

"I did not seek it out," Hanno said.

"Didn't fight it either, the way I hear it," I noted.

He breathed out a laugh.

"No," Hanno frankly admitted. "I did not. I could do more, so I did. I will not put on a crown, but neither will I refuse the authority when I can use it to do good."

It was my time to pause, taken aback. The once White Knight had spent the last few years making a point out of staying out of anything resembling politics unless dragged into them. It was a very different song from the one I'd heard in the Arsenal that he was now singing. I had not, I'd admit, expected this much of a change in him even though the reports from the Jacks had hinted otherwise. Named were, for better or worse, set in their ways. Was that why he was no longer the White Knight and instead claimant to another Name entirely?

"It's not just doing that," I finally said. "You're not a fool, so let's not pretend that the struggle between you and the First Prince isn't a crack spreading across the Grand Alliance."

"Our differences can and will be resolved peacefully," Hanno said. "But they exist for a reason. I do not believe that Cordelia Hasenbach should lead us against Keter, and even less that she should shape the nature of Good in the coming era."

"That sounds," I mildly said, "rather like a judgement."

A pause.

"Yes," the Sword of Judgement said. "It is. My own."

Not the same song I had thought, like a fool, finding only the shallowest part of that. It was hardly the same fucking singer, by the sound of it. No wonder he'd lost his Name, he'd essentially discarded the central tenet of the beliefs that'd turned him into the White Knight. *I bet you couldn't even use Light for while*, I thought. *Until Fate could decide if you were turning villain or not*. I rolled my shoulder. This wasn't a claim, not quite – I'd not given him that opening the way I had Cordelia, the opportunity to define himself in the face of the Other – but we were on the road there. Best I even the grounds before we got there, though, else I would be seen as backing a horse.

He'd need to be brought in on the pivot the First Prince knew and he did not. He'd taken the talks with the Dominion as I thought he would, but there was another conversation happening in Salia that he'd know very little about.

"There's something you need to know about," I finally said.

Almost reluctantly. I knew, objectively, that I was not breaking Cordelia's trust by speaking of this. He was a high officer of the Grand Alliance, he had a right to the information. And still the reluctance lingered. I forged through it, laying out the



demands the Kingdom Under had made in exchange for supporting our attack on Keter. He listened carefully, finishing another layer of stones and beginning the mortar work. When I finished, he kept silent for a while. Considering the situation.

"The treaty you brought back from the Everdark includes an obligation for them to provide foodstuffs at cost for any force engaged in warfare against Keter," Hanno noted. "Are they not breaking the bargain?"

"Toeing the line," I replied. "We need reserves of food with the armies before we set out for the Twilight Ways, and they're not technically obligated to provide that even if we could pay for it. Which, for the number of troops we're marching north, we cannot."

It would be the single largest army fielded on Calernia in my lifetime, if the League truly joined its forces to ours. Largest living army, anyway.

"So while they might be bound to provide foodstuffs at cost should we lay siege to Keter, by then we would have consumed our own reserves and stand completely at their mercy," Hanno summed up.

I nodded.

"So it needs to be seen to here, before we march out," I said. "At the latest a few days after the second wave of reinforcements from Praes arrives, which is in a week and a half. Any later than that and we begin damaging our chances of taking Keter."

We'd be eating through our reserves without being on the march, making us ever more dependent on dwarven help which they would charge us all the more for. That and with every day another few miles of the Principate were lost, the Dead King's armies swelling with the dead they had butchered. If he devoured enough of Procer, there was a real chance that even if we mustered the entire continent against him we'd still lose in a pitched battle. Keter was our only real shot at ending this in time, decapitating the snake. Neshamah knew that as well, of course.

He'd be waiting for us, and every day we waited his defences grew more terrifying.

"I agree that the Herald is in opposition to others in the Kingdom Under," Hanno slowly said. "You are certain he is of Above?"

"Leaning that way, at least," I replied. "Dwarven Names are harder to read."

"Indeed," Hanno gravely replied, eyes dancing, "how dare your largely unprecedented and very useful power not be universally applicable. Most unfair."

It was hard to flip him off while holding the staff and bucket, but I was motivated enough to manage it. He laughed but turned serious soon after.

"The Herald is acting boldly because the odds are against him," Hanno said. "I recognize the instinct, I've seen it many a time. By striking first and early you prevent the greater force from mustering against you. There is our solution, Catherine."

"Going over his head?" I said. "It's been considered. There's a risk of pretty brutal backlash if the dwarves take offense to our trying to play their factions against each other."

"There won't be," Hanno firmly said. "Already the Herald is using great misery to bring about some design, which must be benevolent if his Name has not balked. For him to turn to vengeance after being caught out abusing his power would surely see him fall from grace."

"Those are thin grounds to make so important a bet on," I frowned. "Not all heroes are saints, and they're certainly not all above burning those who burned them."

"You assume he cannot be reasoned with," he pointed out. "I would speak to the Herald myself. "Whatever work this is all in the service of, I am sure he can be helped to find another way to it. And if he will not compromise, then there are those standing against him."

I sucked in a breath.

"If he's warned we've figured out he's after something, we lose our only advantage," I said. "He'll cover his tracks, maybe even poison the well with the rest of the Kingdom Under to make sure we can't go above his head without paying for it. That's a lot of things risked on faith in a man who is actively using the prospect of the annihilation of the entire surface as *negotiating leverage*."

"If he did not intend the betterment of Creation, the fighting of an Evil, he would not be a hero," Hanno calmly said. "I understand your hesitation, for you have fought heroes for much of your career, and the Herald of the Deeps has not earned trust."

He laid his hand on a stone, turning to meet my eye.

"Yet does not mean it should not be given," Hanno of Arwad said. "Plots will not see us through this, Warden of the East. The

answer lies not in forcing his hand but in freeing it to do good."

Hanno knew his namelore well. I had not needed to offer him the opportunity: he had made it himself, by bringing my Name into this. And in the same breath, as Cordelia had revealed where she and I would struggle should she rise, Hanno had done the same. The man who had once been the White Knight believed in Good. In heroes, in the champions of Above. He believed, genuinely and deeply, that they were forces for good and that *their good* was a force of nature as real as the wind or the tides. It wouldn't be over laws and rules and treaties I fought him, because Hanno didn't particularly care about any these.

If he believed a law unjust he would not follow it, and would not expect anyone in his place to do otherwise.

That was not something he had it in him to compromise over. When he said he would speak with the Herald of the Deep, it was because he because there was not a doubt in him that the dwarf would do the right thing once helped into it. And even if that failed, Hanno would not abandon that principle. It was the bedrock of who he was, the belief that people *wanted* to be Good. That they would do it if you helped them. And the thing was, he was right often enough that I couldn't just call him wrong. I'd clash with him a fraction of how much I would clash with Cordelia Hasenbach, I thought. But on those occasions where he *did* choose to fight?

He would not bend. Not a mile, not an inch, not a hair. Every single time we faced each other it would be a fight to the knife, bloody and raw, a chance that the whole edifice might come falling down on our heads.

"That is," Hanno of Arwad said, "what the Warden of the West must be. Not a king or a judge but the intercessor between necessity and faith. Neither leash nor lash, a guide to the lost and hand to faltering. And, when there is no other recourse, the sword against Evil."

The world shivered. He would not rule them, I thought. The heroes. He would not bind or marshal them to a cause or purpose, because he trusted them to follow their own. Hanno trusted heroes, believed in them in a way that I simply could not. I had cut too many of them open to believe them anything more than men. There would be no centre under him, no throne. The Game of the Gods would have rules of engagement, but it would not change: the same old war would be fought, a hundred obscure skirmishes at a time. Hanno of Arwad stood tall in the morning light, calloused hands resting on stone. Workman's hands, tireless in their work.

And the coin kept spinning, spinning, spinning.

## Chapter 34: Movements

*"At this point, it's a matter of principle."*

– Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

I knew myself to be dreaming the moment I saw the tall trees of the Duskwood.

The city stolen from the depths and brought to the surface like a haphazard pile of loot still stood, I saw, but it was no longer the spirited lakeside capital I'd once glimpsed. The labyrinthine streets that snaked through the finest pieces of half a dozen of the greatest cities of the Empire Ever Dark were no longer filled with busy drow, its rough canals nearly free of the strange stone barges that had sailed them. Serolen was not empty, behind the half-empty streets there was still life and energy, but its vigour had been muted.

"Too many went south," Andronike murmured in my ear, voice deep and smooth as a sleep from which none woke. "We are bleeding dry."

I breathed out shallowly, the presence of half my patronesses grounding the loose dream into something altogether more solid. My feet touched the air, which was as solid as if I stood on a pane of glass, and my fingers closed against my yew staff. The length of dead wood followed me everywhere, even in my sleep. Andronike stood at my side, draped in the long shimmering silk robes that had once been the mark of the Twilight Sages. Her hair was long and dark, and at her hip rested a silver mask. We stood side by side, my gaze following those silver-blue eyes in contemplating the city below.

"You still hold the outskirts of the forest," I said.

"We lose more every day," Komena scorned from my right, voice ringing of steel on steel. "The Gloom will not hold."

Where the eldest sister wore the mark of her days as a sage, the youngest had kept into apotheosis the marks of her years of war. She wore the ancient ornate armour of the soldiers of the Empire Ever Dark, and at her hip a long blade of obsidian lay sheathed. Her grip on it was tight, her long fingers almost as claws.

"The demon-traps have not served?" I asked.

After the Arsenal, where the mere presence of a demon of Madness had been enough to send the Night into disarray, Sve Noc had understood the dangers in what they might face. Much sweat and blood had been spent finding an answer to the abominations, many weapons being made but none half as useful as the demon-traps. Simple cubes of obsidian, they had been crafted using the

memories of the finest enchantments of the Twilight Sages with the sole purpose of entrapping and containing demons. They would only do this for ninety-nine years, but that was quite enough. We would be victors or dead by then.

"After we caught the fifth demon the Dead King ceased using them directly against the Gloom," Andronike said. "Yet it does not matter. He has found ways to pierce it, built bridges through. It is a war of attrition now, Catherine Foundling."

And no one won wars of attrition with Death.

"There are no reinforcements to send from the south," I admitted. "Things have taken a turn for the worse here. We're gathering all our strength for a strike against Keter but there's trouble. The dwarves are turning the screws on us."

I didn't bother to spell out exactly how, knowing that the feather-light touches against my mind were the Sisters taking up my invitation to have a look.

"Greed is set in the bones of the nerezim," Komena darkly said.

"We may be able to free a sigil for the assault on the Crown of the Dead," Andronike said, "but do not expect much of us. Enemies beset us from without and within."

I grimaced.

"Kurosiv hasn't been brought to heel?" I asked.

Komena's anger was like an open flame, warming the world of the dream around us. It was not her who answered, unsurprisingly.

"The leech learned more of power than we ever knew," Andronike said. "It cannot be destroyed without bringing about the collapse of a great part of the Night."

Which would be disastrous, after having lost so much of it in Hainaut already. Frankly it was a miracle that the Firstborn were holding off so well against Keter so far. Mind you, part of that had to be sheer numbers and the fact that the Dead King had to march his armies north. In time he'd mobilize strong enough forces to overwhelm Serolen, none of us were deluded enough to believe otherwise. It was just a question of whether or not we could bring the war to a close before that.

"Kurosiv refuses to fight," Komena harshly said. "The insipid maggot. It will know agony without end for this."

"Yet we will not strike first and begin a civil war as we fight for survival," Andronike said, her anger subtler but no less deep. "Its sigil is as a kingdom, now, and worships it as a god equal to us. It would be costly to end them."

I nodded. I'd taken the same gamble they now balked at, but that made me understand their reluctance all the more. It had been an... expensive thing, settling the East. I forced aside the thought before my fingers could dig too deep into my palm.

"Is there word you would have me pass to the rulers of the south?" I asked.

I fell, not fearfully but into a warm and welcoming darkness. I felt arms wrap around me, great wings flapping around us, and the whispers were spoken into my ear.

"Hurry," Sve Noc said. "Else you will face the armies of the north as well as the south."

I slept deeply, after that, and without dreams. It was the best night of rest I'd had since Ater.

—

"You know," I said through a mouthful of pastry, "it's a little screwed up that the best breakfast I ever had was when I was a prisoner in Wolof."

Vivienne aristocratically wrinkled her nose at me from across the table.

"It's a little screwed up that the Queen of Callow never learned not to talk with her mouth full," she retorted.

In the spirit of love and friendship, I crammed another pastry into my mouth and leaned over so my chewing would spill crumbs all over her plate. She forced me into retreat by swatting away wildly at my head with official correspondence from Duchess Kegan, which I magnanimously allowed since I was busy choking. I swallowed it all down with cough, then drank down a mouthful of water. Alamans loved to have flaky little pastries for breakfast, often with fruits and fresh cream, but I usually found it too sweet a fare. These had been good, though, maybe baked without honey. The palace's cooks had remembered my tastes.

It was characteristically Proceran to provide fine cuisine even in the face of the end times, I mused.

"Now that you've returned to pretending to be civilized," Vivienne tartly said, "can I brief you on yesterday's reports?"

"I was waiting for you to," I smugly smiled.

I saw in her eyes that she considered throwing cutlery at me for a moment before reminding herself that she'd probably be seen doing it. She settled for a glare instead before she began speaking.

"The First Prince is behaving unusually," Vivienne told me.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"How so?"

"She spent nearly all afternoon yesterday cloistered with every prince and princess in the region," the dark-haired woman said.

"Which is only to be expected, considering her position," I pointed out. "She needs their support if she's to keep her hands on the reins of the Proceran armies."

If it came to popularity with the rank and file, Hanno would likely win. That wasn't how it worked, though. While he was popular with soldiers and officers, ultimately these were still very much private armies. Those men and women had sworn oaths to serve a crown or a company, and many would balk at following the Sword of Judgement if it meant breaking faith with their prince or captain. If the remaining royals publicly backed the First Prince, it'd turn the tide of opinion. It wasn't like Cordelia was *unpopular* with the soldiers. She just hadn't won the kind of loyalty you could only get from fighting with them in the thick of it.

"The meeting is nothing surprising," Vivienne agreed. "The amount of time she spent on it though, is."

I let out a noise of belated understanding. While I'd seen little of it myself – in all humility, these days when I needed to speak with someone they made the time – all reports from the Jacks agreed that Cordelia Hasenbach was an exceedingly organised woman. She measured the hours of her day and doled them out with as much precision as she could. It was out of the ordinary for her to just throw an entire half day at anything.

"You think she's having a hard time wrangling them?" I asked.

"Maybe," Vivienne frowned. "She's got loyalists in that crowd, but it's true there are those with little love for her and she has much less leverage to keep them in line now."

"Otto Reitzenberg and the Kingfisher Prince will back her," I said. "Our people in their army are sure and I've no reason to doubt Senior Mage Kilian."

Vivienne gave me a look as she decided whether or not to make something of that, then wisely decided not to.

"They're her only two solid supporters," Vivienne said. "Beatrice of Hainaut has been fighting side-by-side with the White Knight for two years now and has warm relations with the man. It's the

same with the rest of the lakeside crowns: Cleves and Hainaut see him as the best bet for getting back their lands."

That and the current Princess of Cleves, Carine Langevin, had a history of enmity with Hasenbach. She'd been the Mirror Knight's lover, part of the plot to backstab the Firstborn after the war, and that'd been before both her father and older brother were buried by the First Prince. For good reasons, mind you, but that knowledge wouldn't anything to lighten up the graves.

"They're also the weakest and least influential," I bluntly said. "They've lost their lands, their troops got mauled and they're reliant on the supplies Hasenbach gives them to keep eating. They're not going to strike out on their own to back Hanno, not if the actual players are leaning the other way."

Partisans of the Sword of Judgement or not, they'd side with whoever had troops to pledge to get them their lands back. If that was Cordelia, like her or not they'd kneel and kiss the ring.

"And I am not convinced they will," Vivienne said. "Rozala Malanza might have a working relationship with her, but there is no fondness there. Alejandro of Segovia will follow wherever Aquitan goes, and between the two of them they command the loyalty of the army that defended Cleves."

There were other principalities that were still part of the Principate, of course. Arans, Bayeux, Aisne, Cantal and Lange. But those crowns were pretty much weathervanes. All of those princes and princesses were currently in their own lands, preparing their defences when they weren't already fighting the dead, and their interest in the going-ons in Salia was minimal. Meanwhile further south Iserre, Creusens and Salamans hadn't *officially* seceded, but they had stopped listening to any orders coming out of Salia so they were effectively nonentities. No, the power here laid where the armies did: on one side Prince Frederic and Prince Otto, on the other Princess Rozala and Prince Alejandro.

If those four couldn't agree on supporting the same Warden of the West, this had the potential to get ugly.

"They have to know how fragile the situation is right now," I said. "I have serious doubts Rozala Malanza would gamble with the fate of Procer just because she hates the First Prince."

Vivienne grimaced.

"It's not that I think you're wrong," she said, "but that I have no other explanation for why that meeting kept going for so long. They had two meals, Cat. *Something* was happening there."



I grunted in assent.

"We're missing something," I said. "What has she been up to since?"

"Going through the Salian archives," Vivienne said. "Or so we're assuming, the Jacks don't have eyes inside. She went in there and hasn't come out."

I couldn't actually recall ever seeing Hasenbach read something for pleasure, so I doubted it was to indulge curiosity she'd gone in there. She must be looking for something.

"She take in anyone with her?" I asked.

"The usual servants and also the Forgetful Librarian," Vivienne said. "The two have developed something of a rapport over the last few years, I'm told."

Mhm. I'd left the Librarian in Salia for a reason: she had prodigious capacity to read and piece together disparate threads of information that would be but to better use in the Principate's capital than anywhere else. That and the scope of her talents was narrow, for all that it was deep: there wasn't much else she was useful for. So Cordelia was definitely looking for something in those archives, not using them as cover for something else she was up to. Or at least not *just* that.

"I want to know what she's up to," I said.

"As would I," Vivienne said, "though we must be careful. Now is not the time for a diplomatic incident."

"It's not the time for timidity either," I replied. "She's beginning her move to become Warden and I need to know if the method is a problem. We'll pull at the thread from both ways, Viv."

I paused.

"I'll look into what was discussed that afternoon with the other princes," I informed her, "but I need you to find out what she's doing in the Salian archives."

"Those are very well guarded," Vivienne reminded me.

I smirked.

"I'm sure they are," I said. "Why, if only I had a professional thief I could pawn this off to."

"Former professional thief," the Princess objected.

"I'll take your word on it," I replied with a pleasant smile, "what with you being my royal expert on theft and all."

Our conversation devolved into name-calling for a bit, but it was eventually settled that she'd handle looking into what the First Prince was looking for in those archives. We were both done eating by then and our tea had cooled, so before we parted ways I heaped one more task onto her plate.

"If Cordelia is making a move," I said, "then Hanno will be doing the same. I know he's much harder to follow around, but..."

"I'll have the Jacks look into it," Vivienne seriously replied. "I don't want to be blindsided by him any more than you do."

Good, I thought. Now I just had to look up an old friend and see what I could get out of him.

—

It took me a while to find where Prince Frederic Goethal was, though after I did getting to him didn't actually take all that long.

Like all the royal lines of Procer, the House of Goethal had a luxurious manse in the nicest part of the city that wasn't the Lineal — which was mostly palaces and old Merovins holdings, and as such could only be entered at the invitation of whoever then ruled Salia. Frederic's ancestors had been rather tasteful, I decided when I got my first look at the manse. Though it had that inevitable Alamans dip into the ostentatious, the property was essentially a large four-story mansion in stone surrounded by beautiful gardens. Sunny ponds and carefully tended wildflowers were the order of the day, with the touch of luxury being half-hidden sculpted kingfishers made entirely out of precious stones.

They were startlingly lifelike, I found. Also each was probably worth enough to arm a company of legionaries, which I suspected the Principate would much rather have than the pretty birds right now. There were wards in place, old magic deeply anchored in the stone wall around the property, but they were nothing too tricky to get around. The easy way through was to dump all my presence into the Night so I wouldn't even register to most boundaries, but the top of the wall actually had a nasty little enchantment set that'd burn anyone touching it so I had to slip in through the front door. Counter-intuitive as it might seem, that was actually where most wards tended to be weakest.

You couldn't have people going through a place all day and expect the boundary to be as firm.

I slipped into the gardens in the wake of a messenger boy leaving through the door, veiled in shadows, and took the time to enjoy

the walk through the little coves. It was a restful place, all water and shade under tall weeping willows. Frederic himself was outside, on a small terrasse by the side of the manse. It was beautifully done, all sculpted wood under a roof that was a grid of wood covered in climbing ivy. The sun peeked through in dappled spots and even the slightest wind had the leaves shivering. The Prince of Brus was not seated at the glass dining table but instead in a long seat by the edge of the terrasse, overlooking the gardens.

There was a small wooden table at his side, redwood, and on it there were three things: a thick sheaf of parchments, a glass and an open bottle of brandy. To my surprise, as I slipped up the stairs and got a better look at him I found that he'd just knocked back a glass and was already pouring himself another. The papers lay abandoned as he pushed back his long blond curls, hand coming to rest on his forehead. He was just as handsome as he had been in the Arsenal, but he looked tired. Tired and haggard. I quietly limped my way behind him, hand on my staff, and leaned forward to speak into his ear just before dropping the veil of Night.

"Rough day?"

Sadly, he didn't drop the glass. He almost choked on the brandy he'd been sipping, though, which I took as sufficient entertainment. Prince Frederic coughed, then half-turned to offer me a woeful look.

"Was that entirely necessary?" he asked.

"Nah," I grinned, drawing back. "Just keeping you on your toes."

I limped my way around his seat, at which point Alamans manners kicked in and he realized I did not have a seat laid out for me. The blond prince rose without batting an eye and insisted I take his seat, which was an even split of charming and annoying. Instead I nudged him back into the chair with the tip of my staff and stole his glass of brandy.

"I'll take my tribute differently," I said before taking a sip.

If my voice had come out a little flirtier than usual, well, there were no witnesses. He was graceful enough in defeat not to argue the point any further.

"It would be as heresy to deny any whim of yours," Prince Frederic easily replied, a smile tugging at his lips. "You are ever welcome into my home, Queen Catherine."

Last time he'd called me that he'd been on his back and rather dishevelled, so I probably enjoyed it a little more than I

should. I sipped at my drink again. Best not to get too distracted, I reminded myself. I *had* come for a reason.

"Don't make promises too quickly," I warned, wagging a finger. "I didn't come here just to have a look at your pretty curls, Goethal."

"Sweet flattery by a black-cloaked woman come in secrecy," Frederic grinned. "I do believe you might be the very sort of woman my uncle warned me about, my queen."

I grinned back, though in the back of my mind I did not he'd said his uncle. Not his father or mother. I'd known him not to be the son of the last Prince of Brus but instead his nephew, but the exact circumstances that'd seen him rise to the crown remained shrouded. He'd been the formal heir to his uncle even before Cordelia forcefully put him on the throne after smashing through Brus during the Great War, though, which smelled of an interested tale. Maybe another day.

"I was Arch-heretic of the East for a bit," I conceded.

He laughed.

"Knowing my uncle, he would have minded that less than your being Callowan," Frederic ruefully admitted. "He was an admirable man in some ways, but he did have... arrested ideas."

An opportunity to moved the conversation towards what I'd actually come here for, and smoothly offered enough that I had no doubt he'd done it on purpose. I had a lot of unflattering things to say about Alamans highborn, but I did have to conceded that they exquisitely trained in certain regards.

"Lots of those going around, these days," I nonchalantly said. "Makes a girl curious."

I sipped at my drink. Blue eyes considered me. Frederic Goethal had never been one of the greats of the Highest Assembly, but he'd been far from inept at the Ebb and Flow. He was a fair hand at games far subtler than those I played.

"Curiosity is no sin, I would think," the Kingfisher Prince said. "Especially between friends."

"Good," I smiled. "Because I have been wondering, you see, at what might have kept so many of my... friends busy for half a day in a room where no others were allowed to enter."

The fair-haired man looked faintly amused.

"Princess Rozala," he said, "believed you'd wait at least two days before approaching one of us. The First Prince replied she could not be certain she would not be visited that very night."

"Had other irons in the fire," I said. "Went to have a look at the latest prince of Procer."

A pause.

"You know, the one in white."

"Hanno of Arwad," Frederic said, "is a good man. One of the pillars keeping this war from coming down on all our heads."

But not, I read between the lines, someone the Kingfisher Prince wanted to follow as Warden of the West. Considering the Prince of Brus had been one of Cordelia's most ardent partisans since the Great War, I was less than surprised.

"Takes more than a pillar to keep the roof up," I agreed. "Thing is, we're all riding the Principate these days. It goes, so do our chance. So when that many crowned heads disappear for an afternoon, questions need to be asked."

"The First Prince availed us of the situation and shared her intentions for the future of the Principate," Frederic candidly told me. "Though her claim on the Name of Warden of the West was discussed, it was not the heart of the matter."

My eye narrowed. I'd used that trick before: speaking the truth, but just the right angle of it. Something was being left out. *They want to keep something from me*, I thought. Which meant something in that room had been agreed to that I'd object to. I sipped at the brandy, considering how best to wheedle this out of him. Concern, I decided. That it was a genuine concern would make it all the sharper a tool.

"I need to know if there's going to be a split in what's left the Highest Assembly," I bluntly said. "We can't afford the three largest Proceran armies left being at each other's throats."

He opened his mouth, but I raised my hand to silence him.

"This isn't me being nosy, Frederic," I said. "I've been approached by others who are worried about this mess blowing up in all our faces, and it's not going to help when your people disappear for half a day and I have no goddamned idea what was being discussed."

Secretary Nestor had been more concerned by the potential blowout of a confrontation between Hanno and Cordelia, but I wasn't even stretching the truth all that much: we were *all* concerned about the Principate. We were well past its breaking point and it was not the kind of realm that would make for a peaceful corpse. Grimacing, the fair-haired prince conceded the point with a bob of his head.

"Your unease is understandable," Frederic said. "There is, however, only so much I can say without breaking confidence."

I eyed him for a long moment, then nodded. He wasn't the kind of man who bent his morals even when it might be convenient, which I tended to admire more than not. There was only so far he could be pushed. I let him choose his words carefully.

"Accord was reached," the Kingfisher Prince finally said. "We are of one mind."

I did not hide my surprise.

"My people weren't sure Malanza would stick with you," I admitted.

He looked, I thought, ruefully amused.

"Princess Rozala is respected among her peers for good reason," Prince Frederic said.

I hummed.

"So I can expect a common public front?" I asked.

He nodded decisively.

"As I said, accord was reached," the fair-haired man said. "The main concern of the talks was how Procer must be forged going forward, which is not something I can share with a foreign crown – however charming the head on which it lies."

Well, I did like the occasional bit of flattery. Especially when it was matched with the kind of genuine attraction I found in his gaze when he looked at me. That said, I was not so easy to distract. He was talking of Procer being reformed, but it could not have been a small sort of reform if it'd swallowed up an afternoon of the most powerful people left in the Principate. And it did nothing to narrow down what it was that Cordelia was trying to find in the archives. Some kind of precedent for the Highest Assembly? She shouldn't *need* one, if she had the right people behind her. A simple vote would get anything she needed done.

So what was it that'd been decided in this room and they were keeping from everyone else?

Yet I had pushed Frederic, I thought, about as far as I could. If I tried to get more out of him he'd start pushing back, or more likely simply change the subject. Mhm, I'd not gotten as much as I wanted out of this conversation but I had gotten enough. The First Prince wasn't about to lose her seat and key royals of Procer were willing to back her openly. That'd put Hanno on the backfoot, considering how much of his strength as a claimant came

from popular support. *It's also not what she's actually up to*, I thought. Hasenbach would not be satisfied with just cutting the grass under his feet. She'd want to go on the offensive, push her claim.

I still had no idea how she'd do that, but it wasn't here I'd find out. Time to make my exit, then, I figured. I sipped at the cup again, noting a third of it was still full. He must have filled it nearly to the brim when he'd poured, which seemed unlike Frederic.

"Dare I ask what kind of reading was enough to make you drink brandy like water?" I asked, gesturing towards the papers.

He looked startled.

"You have not heard, then," Prince Frederic slowly said.

I cocked my head to the side.

"Heard what?"

"I only just got word from the First Prince," he said. "Segovia has fallen."

My fingers tightened.

"How bad?" I quietly asked.

"They had enough priests gathered in the capital to hold back the demons and evacuate," the Kingfisher Prince said, "but this morning the army lost a pitched battles in the northern plains near Leganz. It was disaster: they were encircled, then slaughtered and raised to the last man."

Meaning the principality was effectively finished. Even more worrying was that a great many of the northern refugees – more than half of the Lycaonese that'd escaped the death of their lands – had been sent there.

"The refugees?"

"Fleeing further east, towards Creusens," he said. "They mean to reach Lake Artoise and take barges further south."

I let out a small breath. Cordelia's entire people were not to be ground to dust yet, then. Thank the Gods. Still, Segovia. Fuck. That was one principality away from the northern border of the Dominion. The Hidden Horror was moving south even quicker than we'd thought.

"We're running out of time," I murmured.

The Kingfisher Prince sadly smiled.

"We already have, Catherine," Frederic said. "Now we can only hope that victory will buy us back a dawn."

## Chapter 35: Catch

*"Great Ones, the evidence is clear: we have been betrayed by the Cruxis Cabal. They mean to sell us out to the Emperor, and so we have no choice but to silence them before they can destroy us."*

– Archlector Analphagor of the Temple of Crespuscum, addressing the inner circle (later revealed to have been Supreme General Mendacius of the Cruxis Cabal all along, and also Dread Emperor Traitorous).

My first warning it was about to come to ahead was my being told the Warlord was about to arrive.

Hakram Deadhand, Warlord of the Clans, had decided to ride out ahead of the second wave and arrive in Salia the better part of a week ahead of the armies. He'd be there, Vivienne's messenger told me, by early afternoon. Tomorrow. I spent an hour chewing on that and going through a bottle of wine, unsure how I felt about the surprise and how I *should* be feeling about it. I'd promised Masego I would talk with Hakram when he came to the Proceran capital, but it'd been a faraway thing when I'd spoken the words. Not it was at the front gate, knocking to be let in, and I had never sympathized more with the deer that froze before hunters.

I was not to be allowed to nurse my wine for long, though. I got a visit from Secretary Nestor Ikaroi, though it was not official and it was dealt with briskly. He'd come in person because my rank demanded it, not the message itself. It was certainly short enough that the walk to the Lineal from the city must have felt like a waste.

"Empress Basilia will be arriving in the capital within three days," Secretary Nestor said. "And with her the rest of the League council."

I made some expected noises about how I was looking forward to it and it would be a pleasure to sit in the company of such an august council once more, but even as my lips moved my mind was racing. One was an oddity, two could be coincidence, but if I found a third... This was starting to look like a confluence, power calling to power, and there was only one thread of story in Salia that would demand so great a gathering to be resolved. Cordelia and Hanno had made their choices, begun their paths, and now water was flowing down the riverbed. Fuck, I'd thought I had more time. I sent away the Delosi with courtesy, polished off the rest of my glass and immediately went fishing.



If we were on the last stretch, as I was beginning to suspect, I needed to know how much time I had. Vivienne had hinted to me that she'd be trying her hand at the Salian archives tonight so she might find out what Cordelia was up to, but Hanno was proving unfortunately difficult to find for such a public figure. But first, I thought, I needed to find my third. My proof that events were in motion. And though it was tempting to think that the last part would be another surprise arrival, I dismissed the thought. Everyone that needed to be there for the resolution was already set to be, which meant I needed instead to be looking for a nudge.

One of Above's since my half of the Gods had fallen silent. Thankfully, I had seen to that contingency already and all I needed to suffer was to limp my way up the damnable set of stairs up the eastern wing of the palace where my scrying mages had set up. I dropped down into a sinfully comfortable plush seat after having given my order, massaging my bad leg. The entire length felt like a single throbbing bruise. My mages were good at their business, and so it was only moments before the Observatory connected us to the silver mirror on the other side and Masego's face was in front of me.

"Hierophant," I said.

"Catherine," Zeze enthused. "Very fine timing on your part."

My eye narrowed.

"Let me guess," I said. "You've just had a breakthrough and Roland had a significant role in it."

He looked surprised.

"That is broadly true," Masego conceded. "He had a stroke of inspiration this morning and we just had our first results."

My fingers clenched. Three for three, damn me. There was a reason I'd wanted the Rogue Sorcerer with Hierophant as he looked into returning Below's stories, and it wasn't just because Roland was one of the most learned people on Calernia when it came to magic. He was also a hero, and while my Gods had been silenced the opposition's could still give a nudge here and there.

"Tell me," I ordered.

"We believe the Intercessor is exerting the full strength of her aspect at all times to keep the stories muted," Masego said. "Theoretically, with sufficient power directed in the exact right manner we could break the effort – and perhaps shattered the aspect itself in the process."

"And we've got a source for that power?" I asked.

"Possibly one," Hierophant said. "I need more time to prove it conclusively."

And there it was.

"How long?" I asked.

"Five days."

So that was my timeline. Five days, more or less, the Gods expected that there would be a Warden of the West seated opposite of me before we entered the last stretch of this war.

"Do what you can," I said, and the ritual began to fade.

Five days, I thought, massaging my leg. I was not ready, but then neither were either of the claimants. And that was the part that was bothering me the more I thought about it. Hasenbach had the skills and the will to make a great Warden in some regards, but in others – direct strength, namelore – she was sorely lacking. It was the same for Hanno, whose weaknesses as a candidate were less direct but arguably even more dangerous. Neither of them seemed like a perfect fit for the Name, and though part of that might be blamed on the Role itself not having been settled yet it felt like too weak an explanation.

I'd been going back and forth between them looking for who should be backed, the rest of the Grand Alliance peering over my shoulder and wondering the same, but I couldn't shake the impression that somehow both the choices were losing ones. That this should have been cleaner, that the angles of it were... slightly askew. My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. It would not do to start seeing a devil in every shadow, I reminded myself. And yet. I closed my eye, calmed my breath. My Name shook itself away, a great maw looking over my shoulder. I looked for the stars inside and found nothing, only darkness, but that was all right. The sight of them had been my Name recognizing a skill I already had and crowning it, not a gift Below had given me.

I could do it by hand, if need be, as I always had before. I would find out where the objects in motion were headed and what it meant, then lay the single finger on the scales that I was allowed. And since Vivienne was already looking into Cordelia Hasenbach, my task was clear: I was going to unearth the plans of the Sword of Judgement.

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I went about it the polite way first, sending a rider to his war camp to ask where he might be and how soon we might speak.

The answer I got was a polite workaround giving me an actual answer, which told me that they didn't actually know where he was

right now. That was fine, as I'd not actually expected them to lead me to him: what I'd wanted to find out was whether or not *they* knew where he was. It did not seem to be the case, and that meant he was nowhere official. He'd gone to ground to get something done, which smacked to me of Hanno preparing his move to become Warden of the West. I'd not spent the hour waiting on the messenger idly, using it instead to cross off another possibility: more than half of the possible wielders for the Severance were in the city, so he couldn't be holding a council of heroes over who'd get to wave it around.

I'd narrowed down the possibilities, but Hanno was still in the wind and I had no real idea of where he might be. Thankfully, in the process of finding the potential wielders of the Severance I'd also gotten my hands on an avenue to solve that lack.

"That's a new kind," I noted. "And I can almost *smell* the power coming off it."

Adanna of Smyrna, the Blessed Artificer, looked at me smugly through her spectacles. It was a little unsettling to see those highborn golden eyes in the face of someone who wouldn't spare a thimble of spit if every Soninke were on fire.

"The Hierophant is not the only who learns through facing opponents," Adanna said, straightening proudly. "I have reached a deeper realm of understanding regarding the Light."

I had no trouble believing that, looking at her newest receptacle for Above's power: it looked like a wooden pillar about half a foot wide and seven tall, heavily sculpted and crisscrossed by rods of copper. It stung my eye to linger too long on the sculptures, which I took to mean they were sacred in some way. The Blessed Artificer's entire workshop in the city reeked of the same uncomfortable power, but I kept it away from my face.

"I'm impressed," I honestly said. "Has the White Knight seen it yet? He has final say over your artefacts before they become war assets."

"Not yet," the Blessed Artificer peevishly said. "He's been busy of late."

I cocked an eyebrow, making my disbelief blatant enough even she would pick up on it.

"It looks like a good shot at blowing through one of the gates of Keter," I said. "What is it that's more important, exactly?"

Just the right amount of disbelief and flattery, which should...

"My very opinion," Adanna irritated said. "As if anything the Blacksmith could make would..."

Her mouth snapped shut and she eyed me warily.

"Why is it you came to visit again?" the Blessed Artificer asked.

"We need war assets accounted for before we move out," I lied, "so we can assign them properly."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly more. She didn't call me a liar, though she was clearly suspicious, because that was very much a legitimate reason for me to be here.

"I am sure *Prince White* will inform you when my work is ready for such considerations," Adanna said, emphasizing Hanno's recent title.

Well, no need to ask who she thought should be Warden of the West. I 'reluctantly' conceded that she was right and I really ought to wait for him, which gave her the pleasure of having caught me out trying to go around Hanno instead of figuring out what I was actually for. I let myself be ushered out without protest. I'd got what I needed from her: my next lead. The Bitter Blacksmith was involved in whatever it was that Hanno was up to, and while the Sword of Judgement was surrounded by people who'd obscure his movements should he ask the Lycaonese heroine would be much easier to track.

There were two Bitter Blacksmiths, a brother and a sister who were respectively a villain and a heroine. Helmgard Bauerlein was the eldest of the pair and though unlike her brother she was not a mage and did not work magic into her blades she'd still been the one picked to work on Severance in the Arsenal since she was better at handling exotic materials. In a time without the Truce and Terms, I was pretty sure one of them would have killed the other by now, but instead they'd both been recruited and kept in different theatres of the war – the north for the villain, the Arsenal for her.

Going by memory, we'd sent her Rozala's way after all with another batch of Named from the Arsenal. The Princess of Aquitan's armies saw a lot more siege warfare than Hanno's did, so it'd been a natural fit. That was a good turn for me, since it meant the horse the Bitter Blacksmith would have saddled to get to Hanno's camp would be from Princess Rozala's spare horses. Something I was well within my right to ask about as a high officer of the Grand Alliance. Took me another hour to find out, but not because I was being put off: it turned out the Bitter Blacksmith hadn't actually ridden out from Rozala's camp but from Salia instead, presumably using a different stable.

I picked up her trail after remembering that the First Prince had once mentioned to me in passing setting aside a dozen stables and attendant horses for Named and dignitaries, when asking me about how many villains could actually ride a horse. One of those, I

found out, had loaned out a horse to Helmgard Bauerlein. I wasn't going to get lucky enough that the Blacksmith would conveniently reveal to a stable hand where Hanno had disappeared to, but I did get something out of investigating there: the horse had been taken yesterday afternoon and wasn't expected back until tomorrow. I thanked the girl and limped away with two answers.

First, the Blacksmith had been headed out to the countryside outside the city. This wasn't in Salia. Second, her usefulness to whatever Hanno was up to would end around tomorrow. Meaning whatever it was it was both ongoing and incomplete. It made sense, I grimly thought. Cordelia's own mission in the Salian archives, whatever it might be, was not finished either. Claimant symmetry.

I hit the northern gate of Salia and had the watch captain there rustle up the commander for the evening shift yesterday, but it wasn't through there the Blacksmith had gone. I tried the eastern gate instead and found her trail there. Good. Rode straight to the Army of Callow's camp afterwards, to get my hands on the finest map I had of the region. There I ran into a dead end, because as far as that map had to say there was *fuck all* east of Salia. Townships and grain fields, but the closest city was two days' ride away and that was too long for what I'd found out. Had Hanno just been looking for a quiet place to gather heroes and solidify his backing there like Cordelia had done with her princes?

No, it couldn't be that. Whatever he was up to was ongoing, I'd already established that. He was actively doing something out there, not just looking up a place to do something later. Which meant my map didn't have the right information, or at least the right kind of information. So what was it the Sword of Judgement had been looking for that wouldn't be on my campaign maps? It wasn't like Hanno actually knew the principality, he'd spent even less time here than I had. I went through a glass of wine thinking of that until I realized the obvious: Recall. The aspect, which I suspected him to still have to some extent, gave him access to anything a human hero had ever learned about Salia.

"Something old," I murmured. "Old enough it wouldn't be on our maps anymore."

Hanno wasn't a ritual sort of man, so it wouldn't be a forgotten place of power. The Bitter Blacksmith was the key, I decided. It was a sort of place he'd need her expertise for. The odds were decent it'd be a structure of some sort and I was out of my depth, so I went to find an expert of my own.

"You're looking at this wrong," Pickler said.

"That's why I'm here, yes," I drily replied. "Now tell me something I *don't* know, if you would."

"Male goblins lose their teeth easier, but they grow back until much later in their lives than most women," my Sapper-General helpfully said.

I actually hadn't known that, but I still gesture obscenely at her out of principle. After having taken her amusement at my expense, she then bothered to actually help me.

"He's not going to need a blacksmith for a structure," Pickler said. "It's too far out her expertise. It'll be something smaller, Catherine. Like a trap, or maybe a lock."

I paused, going still in my seat. A lock. *Fuck*, I thought. *Let me be wrong*. The lock wasn't so important as what you found those on. Pickler cleared her throat loudly. I cocked an eyebrow at her questioningly.

"You're going the I-figured-it-out face," the Sapper-General told me, looking irritated.

"Eh," I said. "I might have. Maybe. Why's it making you cranky?"

"Because you didn't tell me what you figured out, you rude fuck," Pickler said. "Do you expect us to just read your mind?"

I considered her for a moment, cocking my head to the side, then smiled beatifically.

"Thank for your teaching me about goblin teeth, Sapper-General," I sweetly replied.

She cursed me all the way out of her tent, as was only just. Smiling as I was, my mind raced ahead. I needed another set of maps, but that wasn't the kind either the Army of Callow or the Legions of Terror would have. The Blood, maybe? I grimaced as I limped my way through the camp avenues. No, Levantine maps were infamously terrible. They'd actually used Proceran ones when fighting the Legions in the central Principate. The Dominion was close enough they should have the maps, but unlikely to have them. I needed people who'd been recording history for long enough that... *Ah*, I grinned. It happened that I did know a historian, and a pretty good one too.

Secretary Nestor Ikaroi of Delos, though in practice an ambassador from the League of Free Cities, was not officially that. So while he fulfilled the functions, the First Prince had not lodged him in one of the empty palaces of the Lineal: if she did, it'd be something of an insult when the formal diplomats arrived since they'd be put on even footing. It was already mid afternoon by then so it was with slight impatience that I found the officer of the Jacks that Vivienne had left in the palace and found out where he was being lodged. Amusingly enough it was only

four streets away from where the Goethal manse I'd visited that morning was, so I rode back to the neighbourhood.

One a horse. It made Zombie jealous, but she was just a tad too noticeable and I was trying to be discreet.

Secretary Nestor received me with all courtesies, visibly expecting me to be about to tell him which claimant we should back, so he was rather surprised when instead I asked him a question as a scholar. Surprised and rather flattered, by my estimation.

"So the Secretariat does keep extensive records of the lands that became Procer even before the Principate was founded," I said.

"We do," Nestor said. "Nicae had extensive trade and marriage ties to many of the great *reales* of the Arlesite south and most of the League imported spelter from what is now Orne before it became cheaper to buy it from the Empire instead. We have a great many contemporary firm and weak sources for the chronicles, though we ever seek to refine our knowledge."

"And what have you got on Salia?" I asked.

"Less than we'd like," Secretary Nestor admitted. "We tried to reconcile the stories from *Chansons des pierres et du vent* with contemporary tribal conflicts, but there is not much to use. The region only began to rise under the Vezelons and then the Merovins, fairly late in Alamans history."

Well, it was worth asking anyway.

"In any of your histories," I said, "is there ever mention of a dwarven gate in Salia?"

The old man leaned back into his seat, looking very interested.

"It has been alleged," the white-haired scholar said. "As I'm sure you know, the Kingdom Under rarely keeps a gate for more than a century or two – with the exception of the Mercantis gate – so the location of many have been lost."

"Of course," I smiled, not having known that in the slightest. "But there are indications there might have been one in what is now Salia?"

"In a manner of speaking," Secretary Nestor said. "There are repeated mentions of the 'Carrouges fairgrounds' in different chronicles, which drew some skepticism as fairgrounds were sacred to early Alamans – it was forbidden to fight there – but there are no Mavian prayers in the region that would explain such a truce being observed."

Dwarven presence certainly would explain the tribes being reluctant to fight. The dwarves were not shy about enforcing civility on everyone else. I leaned forward.

"These 'Carrouges fairgrounds', were they ever found?"

"I don't believe so," the old man said. "There is a town of the same name a few hours to the east of the city, I believe, but the existence of such a gate was never proven."

*Fuck*, I thought, even as I felt a swell of triumph. I was pretty sure I'd just found Hanno, but what I'd found was not exactly pleasing. I took my leave from the white-haired *askretis*, avoiding answering when he obliquely brought up what he'd last come to me to discuss. He took that well enough, declining to press the matter once it became clear I was not ready to commit either way. I rode back to the palace and unfurled the maps there, finding what Nestor Ikaroi had mentioned: a small village to the east of Salia called Carrouges. It shared the name with a nearby swamp.

The afternoon was getting long in the tooth but there was nothing to gain by waiting, so I was back in the saddle within moments of getting some food in my stomach. I took Zombie, this time, to her vocal pleasure. Having bored of terrifying stable hands she cawed triumphantly when we rose into the sky, uncaring that I had first veiled us in Night. The roads were very good this close to Salia so I didn't gain much time by flying instead of riding, but I did get a much better view of what lay ahead from the heights.

We were just past dusk when I led Zombie into a circular glide over what had to be Carrouges according to the map. The village was both unimpressive and empty. Parts of it had also burned down at some point, most of them around the House of Light. Considering the broken tower that'd once topped the temple was at the heart of the burnt-out husks, I was inclined to blame a lightning strike and everybody being gone for that. The Carrouges *swamp*, though, was swarming with activity.

It was hard to tell how large the swamp would originally have been, as it'd since been drained. What had to be maybe two hundred soldiers, by the look of the banners a mix of Brabantine conscripts and *fantassins*, were digging out of the dried mud a massive steel trapdoor. I saw remains of a large stone structure as well, pillars and maybe parts of a roof lying around, but that was broken. The trapdoor was still pristine, and I risked flying even lower under the cover of night. Just as I'd thought, over the steel door a solitary figure was moving around.

Trying to force open the lock in the middle, using long iron poles and what looked like a complicated system of counterweights. I had found the Bitter Blacksmith.



I did not bother to land, instead spurring on Zombie to rise back above the clouds and head back to Salia. I'd already learned everything I needed to, all that showing up there would achieve was a confrontation. When I'd spoken with Hanno, he had stated he wanted to have a conversation with the Herald. That, should an appeal fail, he then wanted to speak directly with the Kingdom Under. For both those things, though, he would need the First Prince to arrange the conversations. Now it seemed he might be digging up an old dwarven gate so he could cut out the middlewoman and make his move no matter what anyone else thought. Something had begun to feel wrong this morning and the feeling was only increasing as the evening went on.

I chewed on that all the way back to the palace, arriving near Midnight Bell, but was no closer to an answer when I found Vivienne waiting for me in the solar. By the look on her face, though, that was about to change. She had a glass of wine in hand and she drained it all when I arrived, slumped bonelessly in her seat.

"Did you ever wonder where the Tyrant learned his gargoyle trick?" the Princess asked me.

"I'd assumed Helikean mages," I replied, sitting across from her. "Was I wrong?"

"I have my doubts," Vivienne drawled, "since I just spent an hour avoiding squealing warthogs made of stone on the roof of the Salian archive. Have you ever seen a stone warthog, Catherine?"

"I have not," I replied, trying and failing to keep the amusement out of my tone.

"You wouldn't believe how quick on the hooves the bastards are, given the weight," she muttered. "Or how goddamned loud they squeal. If I hadn't followed Southpool tripward rules and brought two pigeons to let loose as a decoy the guards would have caught me and we would have had a very awkward diplomatic incident to deal with."

"But you came through," I grinned, "as I never doubted you would."

I received an obscene gesture we'd both learned from Indrani in answer and only then did she begin aggressively slapping down books on the low table. One, two, three – seven all in all, and then one scroll she pressed directly into my hand was not a copy of something but a list. Of all the things Cordelia Hasenbach had been reading for which we did not have a tome of at hand. It was the overwhelming majority, but that wasn't exactly unexpected. My eye scanned down, brow creasing as it did.

"Yeah, couldn't make too much of it myself," Vivienne said. "I got the common books, they're the ones we have in this palace's library."

I hadn't even known we had one of those, but then I'd seen barely a third of this place.

"Any common thread?" I asked.

"The books I did find in the palace are the easy part," the Princess said. "They're all about coin."

I let out a contemplative noise. Huh. Hadn't expected that.

"How so?"

"Apparently back in the early days of the Principate, the First Prince that talked the Highest Assembly into having a common currency and giving the officer control of the mints was saddled with a condition," Vivienne said. "The princes were afraid that First Princes would just debase currency whenever they needed quick gold for a war or a palace and fuck over the rest of Procer doing it. So all the mints were to keep count of how many coins were minted and it'd be written on scrolls that the Highest Assembly would be given a copy of at the beginning of every year."

I blinked in surprise.

"Five of those seven books are compendiums of those scrolls," Vivienne told me. "The other two are about currency as well, but not Procer's. It's about foreign coinage and how much metal there was in it, how much it was worth."

I hummed again.

"Anything that stuck out there?"

"Callow got fucked by the way the Fairfaxes kept allowing other nobles to mint their coins," Vivienne said. "Meant no one outside our borders ever wanted to take it. The Dread Empire's *aurelii* were considered more reliable even during periods when the Tower was at war with half of Calernia."

Yeah, I grimly thought, that sounded about right. Ratface had been appalled at Callowan coinage, back in the day, and though we'd never finished edging out the other Callowan coinage I suspected that Queen Vivienne's reign would see that work thoroughly finished.

"So she's looking at the old finances of Procer," I mused.

"Not just that, though," Vivienne said. "The list casts a broader net."

It really did. The books in there were all over the place. Going by the tiles there was stuff in there about voting rights in the Highest Assembly, Proceran trade with the League – particularly Mercantis – and more historical stuff. Like the old Lycaonese states before they were turned into principalities, chronicles about Penthes in the last two centuries, precedents for royal land grants in Procer, Highest Assembly records from Orne and Bayeux, and most strangely of all a book about the wars waged by the Republic of Bellerophon. Vivienne was right, it was a pretty broad net that the First Prince had cast.

"I'm not seeing a pattern," I admitted.

Somewhere in this was the foundation of Cordelia Hasenbach's attempt to become Warden of the West, but I wasn't seeing it.

"From the list there are maybe seventy of the named works that are about trade," Vivienne said. "Either inside Procer or with the League of Free Cities. If I had to guess, that's the unifying thread. The coinage books are just to understand what the coin was worth, it's all about where the gold has been going."

Only that didn't explain the histories, I thought with a frown. Or the sudden preoccupation with voting rights when at the moment the Highest Assembly was pretty much an empty formality. Why would she-

"*Fuck*," I swore. "Merciless, bugging Gods *fuck*."

Vivienne poured herself another cup of wine but didn't even offer me the same courtesy, the ungrateful wretch.

"I take it you've realized something?" the Princess drily asked.

"We're not seeing a pattern because those books aren't about one thing," I said. "They're about two things."

I rapped a knuckled atop the books.

"She used those to know what Procer's coin was worth," I said. "Then the trade books and the foreign currency books are about finding out how large the wealth of other nations was. Specifically nations that were trading with the dwarves."

"That explains the Mercantis books and the Penthesian ones, they both have gates," Vivienne said, "but Bellerophon-"

"Hates Penthes to the bone," I said. "So most of the time, when they declare a war it's attacking Penthes. That weakens trade in the region, even if they lose the war."

She was a smart woman, Vivienne, so she caught up quickly.

"That's what the records of Orne and Bayeux in the Highest Assembly are about," she realized. "They used to trade raids with the Counts of Ankou through the Red Flower Vales, and whenever their holdings were hit-"

"-they complained about it in the Highest Assembly, trying to get backing from the First Princes," I finished. "And when Cordelia sees those complains, she knows that trade with Callow was drying up since the Vales used to be our only land path to Procer. It's about their wealth, not us."

"It's insane, Catherine," Vivienne grimaced. "I know she's an intelligent woman, but trying to figure out entire treasuries from just these records? To have even a chance, she'd need..."

"Someone capable of reading through an entire library in a day and remember every word," I interrupted. "Like, say, the Forgetful Librarian."

I saw the understanding sink in. Cordelia wasn't reading those books herself, at least not most of them. She was using the Librarian to do it and then using her as a living reference book to work with. It was insane, just as Vivienne had said, but if there was one woman in Calernia who might be able to pull it off it was Cordelia Hasenbach. Who was, for all her flaws, a remarkably brilliant woman.

"She's putting hard numbers to how much trade with the dwarves is worth," I said. "That's what she's doing. She's figured out something about what the Herald wants and she's following the trail so she can figure out how to flip the negotiations around."

"That's good," Vivienne slowly said. "Isn't it? We're in favour of getting the best of the Herald, aren't we?"

"No when Hanno is going all in on a fundamentally incompatible path," I cursed. "He's digging up a dwarven gate to approach them on his own."

"Cordelia's position could accommodate that," the Princess frowned. "She's not committed yet, she-"

"She is," I interrupted. "Because of the other thing she's doing, the one you couldn't figure out because you didn't have the conversation with Frederic Goethal I had this morning."

My fingers clenched.

"Old Lycaonese borders, voting rights?" I said. "Look at the shape of it, Vivienne. Hasenbach was the Iron Prince's heiress, in principle she's Princess of Hannover as well as Prince of Rhenia right now. Mathilda of Neustria died in Hainaut and word is pretty much all the Siegenburg of Neustria died defending

their lands. That leaves two people to hold all the north: Cordelia Hasenbach and Otto Reitzenberg."

And Otto Redcrown had been in that closed council.

"The only reason voting rights would matter," Vivienne slowly said, "is if she believes that there is about to be a change to the borders of the principalities."

"The Kingfisher Prince told me this morning that the princes would stand behind her united," I said. "I think we've just found out how she bought that."

"She's going to abdicate," the Princess said.

"Not just as First Prince," I said. "As Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Hannoven as well. She's uniting all Lycaonese lands under Prince Otto."

"Princess Rozala would dare ask as much," Vivienne said.

"No," I said, "but Hasenbach is *smart*. I underestimated her."

I let out a sigh.

"She's realized she can't be a ruler and the Warden of the West at the same time," I said. "So she's settling all her affairs before she goes all in on her claim."

And there would be no room for retreat, I realized with horror, after having cut away so much of what she loved. She would be in it to the knife. And so would Hanno, who fought for nothing except what he was willing to die for: he would not bend, not now that he believed he'd found a way to save us all. Wasn't that the lesson he'd learned from the silence of the Tribunal: that sometimes you had to take it on your own hands, because no one else would? *Fuck*, I thought once more. I still wasn't sure what that royal land grant book was for, but it didn't matter.

Not when I'd just become clear that the two claimants to the Name of Warden of the West had just begun to plod down path that *could not be reconciled*. The differences of opinion over the Blood, they'd just been a pivot that differentiate them. The dwarves were the pivot where the knives came out and neither of them were leaving any room for retreat. Hanno was staking his entire soundness as a leader on the gambit of levelling with the dwarves, risking disgrace if he failed. Which he would if Cordelia found her solution and got to the dwarves first. If he lost there, he was done as a claimant.

The entire philosophy he'd adopted in the wake of the Choir of Judgement falling silent would be proved wrong. The judgment he'd

finally begun to venture would be proved *wrong* at its first real test.

On the other hand, Cordelia had burned every bridge behind her before taking her leap. She was renouncing titles and wealth and rule of the most powerful nation of Calernia to become Warden of the West, which she'd prove worthy of by bending the Herald of the Deeps to her will. Something that could be rendered completely worthless if Hanno got to him first and succeeded with his appeal on emotion. All those sacrifices rendered into nothing in the span of a single conversation. My stomach tightened just thinking about it.

"They're not just rival claimants, Vivienne," I quietly said. "If one of them wins, it fucks over the other. Strongly. Permanently."

She studied me with hooded eyes.

"You told me," the Princess said, "that a pivot cannot be had without a cost."

*It's too high a cost*, I thought. Their trajectory was a collision from which only one would walk away, and I was not certain we could afford to lose either of them. Slowly I shook my head.

"This is not coincidence," I murmured. "Or fate, and least of all providence."

And that left only one possibility: enemy action.

## Chapter 36: Reiterate

*"If you cannot forgive, forget; if you cannot forget, forgive."*

– King Jehan the Wise of Callow

The morning of Hakram's arrival, I got a visit from Archer.

Though Indrani enjoyed a good pampering most out of the Woe, she was too restless to actually stay in a palace for long. It'd been the same back in Laure, where she'd spent more in dives by the docks than in her suite. I trusted her not to get into too much trouble, and once in a while she did stumble across an interesting tidbit. Sometimes she even bothered to share those. This morning, by her sunny smile, was to be one of the lucky ones. Indrani only got that manically pleasant when she figured she'd found something of sufficient value to ask something of me in turn.

"Tell me I'm good," she demanded, sitting on the table just to the left of my eggs.

"You're sometimes slightly to the north of decent," I helpfully replied. "Like, once every few years. It has happened. I'm told. In rumours. But not, like, very reliable ones."

She wagged a finger at me.

"If I don't get honey, you don't get your treat," Archer said.

Leaning forward, I offered her a widely pleasant smile and snatched a little covered porcelain bowl which I then put on her lap. There was a pause.

"There's honey in that, isn't there," Indrani resignedly said.

"I think we should be talking about where my treat is, if anything," I replied, taking a bite of my eggs.

Good eggs. They tasted like salt and a little bit of victory at someone else's expense. She sighed, stealing a fork and then a bite of her own. Magnanimously I allowed this raider-like behaviour, even though taking breakfast from her rightful queen could be seen as treason in a certain light.

"Our little hero friends are about to meet for a Good talk," Archer told me. "Tonight. A buddy told me it's mandatory for any of their kind that're in the region."

I let out a low whistle. That was a lot of heroes. Maybe the most there'd been together in more than a century: even when we'd started the Truce and Terms, most of the people who'd signed it hadn't actually been in the same place. There had to be at least forty heroes around Salia at the moment, since all those that'd been on other fronts had retreated to the capital with their parent army.

"Hanno called that?" I asked.

"I didn't get told that outright," Archer admitted, "but there's really no one else who could give that order and expect it to work."

Well, she wasn't wrong there. If the Grey Pilgrim still lived he would have made a second, but since Tariq had died there'd been no potential rival for leadership on Above's side of the fence.

"How reliable would you say your friend is?" I asked.

"She wouldn't lie," Indrani firmly said. "I trust her."

Either the Silver Huntress or the Vagrant Spear then, I thought. I wasn't sure that Alexis would come to her with something like that even after they'd buried the hatchet, though, so most likely the Spear. I took another bite of eggs, swallowed.

"Why'd she tell you?" I asked.

"Because the Blood are worried about this little tiff between Cordy and Shiny Boots going bad so they've had a talk with their Bestowed," Indrani said. "Congrats, Cat, you're now the adult in the room the rats go tattle to."

"Ah, everything I ever wanted," I thinly smiled.

The thought that even the Blood, whose idea of diplomatic subtlety was painting the cudgel black before hitting someone with it, could tell the situation was getting volatile rather soured my appetite. I needed to ask one more thing first, though.

"You find out where they're meeting?"

I'd set down my fork, so Indrani did not miss a beat before helping herself to my breakfast. Refuge had taught her some very firm ideas about unattended food being up for grabs.

"Some place out in the country," Archer said. "A village in the middle of nowhere."

"Let me guess," I smiled, "is it called Carrouges?"

She shoveled in the last mouthful of breakfast and eyed me balefully.

"How would you even know that?" Indrani complained through her chewing.

"I was just there last night," I sighed. "Shiny Boots is digging up a dwarven gate there."

And then dragging everyone there. That was telling: he'd get the Bitter Blacksmith to open the lock for him and then, with that open gate in sight, make his case to the heroes that the Kingdom Under should be appealed to directly. Going around Cordelia. I grimaced. Even if he didn't get to it immediately after, if he let a few days pass, the simple act of having gotten most of the heroes to back his solution would kneecap Cordelia's claim. Their Name was about handling heroes, and the heroes would be making their preference pretty clear. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"I might have to do something about this," I admitted. "If he goes through with it there's only confrontation left."

I wouldn't need to warn the First Prince about it happening, not since the Kingfisher Prince would be part of the gathering and I did not doubt he'd inform her the moment he got the summons, but I wasn't actually sure Cordelia could do a lot about this. She was a high officer of the Grand Alliance, for all that now the authority was fraying along with all authorities more parchment than steel, so it could be argued that she had a right to attend



and make to them her own case. *And Hanno would let her*, I thought. He'd respect the right, even if it opened the door to a rival claimant.

It wouldn't be a good battlefield for her, though. Hanno had fought alongside most those people and he was still the Sword of Judgement, two things that'd weigh the balance of opinion in his favour. And should the First Prince's support come mostly from Proceran heroes, which I suspected it would, then it would be final nail in the coffin of her claim: people could live with a Warden who was Proceran, but no one would want a Proceran Warden. I sighed, lost in thought, and came back to the sound of Indrani slurping down the last of my tea.

"I need to find out what Hasenbach will be up to," I said. "She's been looking for her slayer's arrow, but now she needs to give answer or she'll get knocked out of the race."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" Indrani asked.

I cocked my head at her.

"Did Vivienne talk to you about what we found out?"

"You two think this is a Bard plot," she said. "That she somehow nudged things a while back so that it'd get ugly when they fought it out."

"There's something off, 'Drani," I said. "I can feel it. They're both better than this, but it's like every action one takes scrapes the other raw."

Archer chewed her lip.

"I've learned not to bet against you when it comes to this stuff," she said. "So do what you think you have to, Cat. But if you're worried that time is running out, then you need to be careful about something too."

I leaned back, giving her my full attention. It was rare enough for her to venture advice that when she did I always felt bound to take it seriously.

"You need to get your own house in order, Cat," Indrani said. "You're worried about the two of them fucking it up when someone becomes Warden of the West, but you're not done either. You need to clean up your loose ends, otherwise it's you that becomes the weak point."

My lips thinned.

"You're talking about Hakram," I said.

"Not just him," she replied. "Whatever the Hells you have going with Akua these days, that needs seeing to. And you made a promise to the Pilgrim before he died."

I had made three, but I knew which one she meant. I'd sworn to Tariq that I would reconcile with Hanno. Which I very much had not, for all that our last conversation had been cordial. That'd been a veneer, a surface thing. Nothing had been aired out or fixed.

"I don't have a lot of time, Indrani," I quietly said. "Four days, maybe less."

"So you best get a move on," Archer mercilessly replied. "And one last warning, since I know you."

She met my eye squarely.

"You like to just dip your toe in and retreat," Indrani said. "Like you're gauging the temperature of the water. It's a thing you do when you're afraid of dealing with a hard conversation, Cat, and you've even got the excuse of all that's going on right now to justify being half-hearted."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Don't," Archer said. "You might be pissed, but Hakram's one of us. Don't botch this because it stings."

My fingers tightened around the arm of my chair. She set down my empty cup and hopped off the table, throwing me one last look over her shoulder before walking out of the room.

That I wasn't sure who it was I was angry at only made the anger burn more harshly.

—

An hour before Noon Bell I learned that my tentative steps to find out what the First Prince was planning as a response to Hanno's summons were pointless. I didn't have to rely on spies because it was at my own damn door that the knock came: Cordelia Hasenbach wanted to meet.

I offered to head to the archives, but she'd taken the lead already. She was out, had gone by her palace and was ready to receive me as soon as I could make the time. I didn't bother to play coy or string it out. The sooner that talk was had the better. Word had come by scrying ritual that Warlord Hakram and a band of wolf riders were out of the Twilight Ways and making good pace, expected half past Noon Bell. I figured that the other half of the reason Hasenbach had left the archive was that she wanted

to have a look at the preparations to formally receive the Warlord of the Clans for the first time in Proceran history.

So I limped my way through beautiful old Merovins halls again, led by servants to another of the pretty little parlours that seemed to grow like mushrooms wherever Cordelia Hasenbach stayed for more than a few days. I was ushered in quietly, my visit not secret but definitely less than official, and I found that the First Prince of Procer looked *tired*. She was impeccably dressed in grey and green, hair in a Lycaonese braid, but even though she'd tried to hide it under cosmetics I could see the rings around her eyes. Someone had been reading instead of sleeping for too long.

We got through a single round of the usual courtesies before she brought up why she'd asked me to come, which by Hasenbach standards was positively brusque. She, too, was feeling time slipping away through her fingers.

"When we first began discussing the Liesse Accords, one of the central principles was the founding of a city in the Red Flower Vales," Cordelia said. "A centre of learning and a seat for the Accords."

Also a way to discourage war between Callow and Procer, since it'd be standing right in the middle and sworn to neutrality. The Stairway was a second land path between our nations, but it was also ridiculously defensible and easy to close off. Geography always had a seat at the table when war was discussed, whether we liked to admit it or not. I intended to have ours strongly arguing for peace.

"As Queen of Callow I have the right to grant lands on the kingdom's side," I said. "My successor has sworn to abide by the grant."

If there'd actually been Counts of Ankou around left this might have gotten messy, but they'd been unseated with the Conquest. Telling a governor I'd appointed myself that the map would get redrawn was much less complicated.

"Indeed," Cordelia said. "Princess Vivienne was most eloquent in arguing in favour, arguments I passed to the Highest Assembly. Not enough, unfortunately, were swayed."

If the ceded lands had come from just Orne or Bayeux it might have gone through, Vivienne had written me back then, but with two principalities losing a slice it'd turned into a slog. Ceding territory through anything but a peace treaty needed to be ratified by two thirds of the Highest Assembly and the First Prince just hadn't had the votes.

"And you're telling me that's changed?" I asked.

She smiled and set a scroll down on the table between us. I popped the seal and unfurled it, reading through the dense lines carefully. Most of it was legalistic nonsense, but the gist of it was pretty clear. Since some principalities had formally seceded and some summons to emergency sessions of the Highest Assembly refused, the First Prince was exercising ancient prerogatives to establish a new principality. The Principality of Cardinal. Its borders had been decided this morning by vote in the Assembly, but there I tripped over a phrase.

"What is a '*vote présentiel*'?" I asked.

"Only princes in attendance or their representatives may vote, and there is no quorum to any decision so taken," the First Prince said. "The decisions are not binding until a second vote has been taken over the matter, but to be fully overturned it would need a two thirds majority or the consent of the First Prince."

Meaning that this morning, Cordelia Hasenbach had created a principality out of two chunks of land – one in Orne, one in Bayeux – and been made princess of them. She had then, I saw in the following lines, declared independence from the Principate of Procer. In practice the land wasn't actually in her hands yet, but the legal foundation was there and if Rozala Malanza backed this, which by the roll count of the votes she did, then it was a done deal. So long as she held firm and refused to let the decision be overturned, the land was split from Procer and ready to be added to the city-state of Cardinal.

There had been two things I wanted most out of Cordelia Hasenbach: Cardinal and Procer's signature on the Accords. She was already halfway to delivering that.

"That is," I frankly said, "a very good bribe."

She didn't take offence, even though her nose wrinkled ever so slightly at the bluntness. We both knew that this was. I closed my eye, thinking it through. The First Prince was giving me this but she'd not asked for anything in return. So what was it that she got? I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. The timing made it clear that this was her answer to what Hanno was up to, but this wouldn't help her with the heroes. It wouldn't – no, I was looking at this wrong. Hasenbach was never going to win this by heroic backing, she already knew that. Her angle, her strength, it was on the great scale. The nation game, not the boots on the ground where Hanno thrived.

She hadn't asked anything of me, I realized, because my *signature* was what she was after. What she wanted was the two of us working together to make the Age of Order so that she was already pretty much filling the shoes of the Warden of the West. Hanno's opening stroke was gathering support, Cordelia was going straight for the

authority. She wanted the wind in her sails before she ever stepped foot in front of the heroes, providence nudging things her way.

"Someone's been teaching you namelore," I finally said, opening my eye.

The blonde princess' austere face turned anguished, for a moment. It was gone in a flicker, like it'd never been there.

"Owls are terrible gossips," the First Prince simply said.

*The Augur*, I thought. Hasenbach wasn't learning namelore so much as brute forcing through prediction what might and might not work. Gods, that must be rough on her cousin. Especially the parts that had anything to do with me, because I had it on good authority that the Augur had been unable to predict me since I became First Under the Night. Sve Noc had seen to that. *So she doesn't know if I accept this or not*, I considered. *She just knows that if I agree, she might be able to beat Hanno.*

"I see you have concerns," Cordelia calmly said. "Perhaps I can allay them."

"I'm not sure you can," I honestly said.

Her calm did not waver.

"Then perhaps it is a matter of tightening our alliance," the First Prince of Procer said. "Let us sign the Liesse Accords."

I paused for a beat.

"You're serious," I said.

"I am," Cordelia said. "I believe the Blood is so inclined as well, and should have the hour free. It has waited long enough, Queen Catherine. Let us sign the papers."

Fuck, I thought. I wasn't *sure* it'd make her win, if I went through with this. If my instincts were right every time, I wouldn't have murdered my own fucking father. And this, the offer on the table *right now*, wasn't it what I'd been after for years? I could get the world I'd been after today. Not tomorrow, not in a year, not on the horizon. Today. Wouldn't it change what this war was, to be fighting for something? It might even help. And it wasn't like I'd be fucking over Good, one of Above's own claimants was *asking* me for this. It wasn't a plot or a scheme, there was no reason it should..

I breathed in, breathed out. Forced the thoughts back into line. I knew myself just well enough to be aware that, given long enough, I could justify nearly anything to myself if it got me something I wanted badly enough. That'd gotten me through some

hard decisions, but it'd let me make some bad ones too. And, setting aside all my worries about one claimant winning against the other, there was still one warning fresh to my ear. Archer had been right, when she'd told me I needed to see to my loose ends. Going into this half-cocked was potentially disastrous. I licked my lips. I'd not noticed them going dry.

"I'll have to consult with my successor first," I said, tone even.

Her control slipped just enough that I saw her eyes tighten. Dismay. Fear. *She thinks she loses tonight if she doesn't get this*, I realized. *That she'll have abdicated for nothing, thrown her life and her life's work away pointlessly*. And I feared too, knowing that, as much because I was not sure I could stop Hanno as because I was afraid of what Cordelia Hasenbach might yet do, cornered.

"I see," the First Prince replied, tone just as even.

I rose to my feet, then hesitated.

"What is it about him that you find unacceptable?" I asked.

Her face was a mask, pale and unmoving.

"Hanno of Arwad is the culmination of personal power," the First Prince said, tone hard as steel. "He derives authority from his personal virtue, his personal strength of arms, his personal ties to a Choir. And for all his flaws, I recognize the man to be exceptional. Which is the very issue: he is an *exception*."

The Lycaonese princess rose to her feet.

"He has not method, no system, because he does not use them," she said. "His judgement, when it is not that of angels, is entirely personal. Circumstantial. And perhaps, for Hanno of Arwad, most of the time the answer will still be correct. But ask yourself this – will the same be true of his successors?"

Her blue eyes burned.

"That is why we partition power, why we share it," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "Why we make rules all have to obey. His flaw is the same was yours, Warden: he believes, deep down, that he is capable of wielding power without misusing it. That others after him will do the same."

Her jaw clenched.

"I have seen what that mistaken belief did to Procer," she said. "Even when the power was in my hands. And I would not see that mistake repeated for all of Calernia. There must be rules for

Named as there are for men, and I cannot brook anyone who would do otherwise.”

The queen’s judgement, I thought, against the assembly’s law. Of course she didn’t trust heroes, while she was trying to keep Procer from falling apart they kept... getting in the way, from where she sat. The Mirror Knight emboldening a prince to make a scheme that nearly pulled the Firstborn out of the war, another trying to kill a prince of the blood and then the Kingfisher Prince refusing to ask for her death. All of it, that expanding mess dropped in her lap, culminating in that moment where the White Knight looked her in the eye and refused to compromise.

A disaster that the First Prince traced back to the Chosen, and their leader had just refused to consider helping fix it.

It’d not been that that happened, at least not exactly. Not entirely. But I could so easily see how she’d come to see Named as needing to made subject to rules, and how fundamentally she would never believe that Hanno of Arwad would ever do it. If he had it in him, wouldn’t he have done it back then? It was the harshest light possible to look at the past in, but no part of it was entirely *wrong*. That was the problem here. When I was going to speak to Hanno one last time, and I must, I expected his troubles to be just as grounded in truth. Neither was wrong.

One must still lose, though, and so that damn coin was spinning.

“You’re not out of this yet,” I said, and left it at that.

—

I wasn’t part of the party that greeted Hakram when he rode into the capital.

Procer was the host, it wouldn’t do to step on their toes. The two of us were rulers now, I no longer had a claim on him beyond what the Warden of the East could stake. Instead of moping in a palace, I went down into the city and found a nice little butcher’s shop. They killed the pig out bad, clean and quick, and I bought a bag of salt from the owner’s brother just down the street. I put the dead pig on my borrowed horse’s back and headed back up to the Lineal. There were plenty of empty parks and palaces, so I found myself a nice little thicket of trees and hung my cloak on a branch.

It’d been a while since I’d dug a fire pit, but I still remembered how. I put my back into it, and it when it was done I went back to the palace to snatch up a spit and firewood. Blackflame would spoil the taste, so I struck Legion pinewood matches and struggled with the feeble breeze that’d shown up to fight me. I should have brought oil to quicken that up, even if it would have been cheating a bit. The pleasant thing about Name

strength was that I needed no Night to shove the pig onto the spike and begin to roast it. I rubbed salt on sparingly. Orcs preferred the meat without spices.

It was halfway to Afternoon Bell when I heard the first footsteps. Vivienne had taken longer to tell him where I was than I'd thought she would. I didn't need to ask who it was, or even turn. I might have temporarily lost the knack I'd had as Warden of the East, but I could still pick out the sound of that gait out of a thousand. There'd been a time where it had been just as familiar as my own, almost an extension of my own body. Those days were over. I still remembered.

The steps stuttered as he entered the thicket.

"Smells good," Hakram Deadhand said, voice hesitant.

Careful. I glanced at him, turning the spit. He looked, I thought, much the same as he had in Ater. Oh the armour was off, the same plate that'd been burnt by Summer flame and he had never left abandoned, but the clothes didn't matter much. He was still one of the tallest orcs I'd ever met, broad-shouldered and built. The arm and leg he'd lost in my service were now in steel, the finest prosthetic work Hierophant had ever done, and the hand he'd lost to the Lone Swordsman remained in bone. Deadhand they'd called him, even before they called him Adjutant.

There was still a song about it. *Dead the hand and dead the man*, I almost hummed. But it was a Legion song, and he was no longer of the Legions. Or one of mine at all. I had not yet said a word, and already that knowledge hung between us like a funerary shroud. I took my hand off the spit, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

"I thought," I said, "that this would be hard in the way that picking at a wound is hard."

Hakram stood in a tall oak's shadow, the sun not reaching any of the limbs that would reflect it.

"But it's not?" he quietly asked.

I smiled, a tad bitterly.

"I just don't know what to say," I admitted.

In a way, that was even worse. Six months ago he'd been the only person in my life I'd ever found it hard to understand. Now it was like there was a pit between who we'd become and who we'd been and anything I said would just be shouting to the shadow across the pit rather than the man in front of me. Pointless. Slowly, Hakram moved out of the shade. Eyes watching me every step of the way, as if waiting for a storm or a refusal, he made



his way to the other side of the fire. There he sat, lowering himself to the forest floor.

"Then," Hakram Deadhand said, "perhaps you should let me start."

## Chapter 37: Bygone

*"The past is best yearned for with one eye closed."*

– Free Cities saying

"I didn't leave Wolof meaning to become Warlord," Hakram said.

The pig on the spit between us crackled as the woodsmoke rose, sometimes veiling parts of his face. Light moved across his skin and steel in spots, the branches above swaying to let the sun pass at the whims of a lazy breeze. This felt, I thought, like a conversation best had at night. In a dimmer place, where the dark would smooth sharp edges and the stars would give only the kindest of lights. Not on a sunny afternoon, where I could read every slight expression. Where I risked learning things I would not be able to unlearn. But that was not what the roll of the dice had given me, and I knew I could not put this off even if part of me craved to.

In the back of my mind the coin was still spinning, and tonight Hanno of Arwad was making his move. It was sunlight or nothing, and nothing may cost more than just me.

"I didn't think you did," I replied. "I'm just not sure if that makes it better or worse."

That he'd planned it and not told me, that would have gouged deep. But in a way that all our years together would be tossed away on, what, a fucking whim? My fingers clenched down on the spit until the knuckles turned white and I reminded myself that I wasn't being fair. That I was just getting angry because it was easier that way. Anger was an old friend, and it was a lot more pleasant than feeling *betrayed*.

"I say it not to excuse but to make it clear that I was not deceiving you, before I left," Hakram evenly said. "That it was not false."

My hand twitched. I released the spit, stepping back and playing it off as if I were getting away from the smoke and heat.

"Just because you weren't lying doesn't mean it wasn't false," I harshly replied. "It just means you weren't admitting things to yourself. And maybe that I wasn't either."

He watched me through the smoke, then his jaw tightened.

"Say it out loud," Hakram gravelled. "It's already stuck in your fangs, don't choke on it."

How like him to not even leave me my grievances to chew on.

"You wouldn't have made this decision," I said, "before the Arsenal."

And there it was, the plain truth that I knew deep in my bones. I'd spent him too sorely that day, crossed a line, and it had changed things for good. Maybe he didn't regret it, like he'd insisted since, but we'd both had a good look at what it actually meant for us to be as we had been. That there were costs, that it might get him *killed*. We'd seen in practice how someone giving unconditionally, trusting without reservation, would end. At least when the other half of it was me. He'd die, one piece at a time, until I'd spent every last limb of him.

"You didn't listen then," Hakram harshly said, "and you're not listening now. It's about what put me in the chair. It's about how you treated me when I was in it."

"Like I didn't fucking want you to die?" I incredulously replied.

I'd have bitten back on that answer, before, been careful. Given ground because I was afraid to lose him. But he was good as lost anyway now, wasn't he? He couldn't just turn around and become the Adjutant again, call the whole Warlord thing a lark. So this time I didn't bite my tongue.

"You lost an arm and a leg," I said, "and you wanted me to just send you back into the melee like nothing happened. Like it was just... cosmetic."

I spat in the fire.

"But it really did happen, Hakram," I bit out. "And if I let you keep on pretending it hadn't you were going to lose your head instead of a limb."

"You lost trust in me," he growled. "An aspect was withering like a sick plant because I put my soul in your hands and then you dropped it. Can you imagine what it felt like, to bind so much of yourself to someone else and then feel them *turn away*?"

The orc scoffed.

"You can't," Hakram said, flashing fangs. "Because you don't do that, Catherine. When you're afraid it's going to end, you look away first so it ends on your terms. Like you did with Kilian."

My stomach clenched. It had just enough truth to it to sting. The kind of barb only someone who knew me would know to throw.

"I'm not without fault," I said. "Hells, I'm mostly faults. But you know what I did, Hakram?"

I gestured around us, at us.

"I fought for this," I said. "You were unhappy and I tried to understand why. To fix it. So I don't want to hear a sermon from the man whose idea of mending the gap was putting me to secret tests in the middle of the most brutal campaign of either our lives."

I'd not forgotten those evenings in Hainaut when I'd agonized over the bad plan to deal with the Clans he'd pushed for me to read. How many hours I'd wrestled over it, trying to find a saving grace, only to learn that it'd been a test the whole time. That he was finding out whether I'd take bad advice from him out of guilt. And I understood why he'd done that, I did.

It hadn't made it any less hard to be on the other side of.

"You didn't fight," I harshly said. "You stood back to see if I would. And maybe you needed to see that I really would, that it did more to help than anything I said."

I leaned forward, eye hard.

"But it also means I'm not going to take *shit* from you about turning away first, Hakram," I said. "I still had both eyes back then, and you wouldn't meet either."

I was panting, my muscles clenched tight. Smoke wafted up, the crackling fat of the roasting pig. The thick green skin of his face was taut around his lips, like he was fighting the urge to growl and shout.

"I didn't come here to fight," Hakram finally said.

"Maybe we ought anyway," I grunted.

Dark eyes mulled that over, with that usual careful thoroughness.

"Maybe we ought," he acknowledged.

I hid my surprise, but he knew me well enough he caught it anyway.

"Even when we reconciled," Hakram said, "it was half-done. The wound was bandaged but neither of us would speak of the sword."

I rolled my shoulder, easing the muscle that had begun to cramp.

"And what sword is that?" I asked.

I knew better than to think he meant the Severance, though it was the blade that'd cut him.

"You and me," he said. "The Woe. We let rot set in."

I almost flinched back. There were precious few havens left in my life, places where I could feel safe and at rest, but the Woe were one. That I might get that stripped away from me now felt like too ruinous of a cost for this sunny little afternoon.

"It's in your teeth," I said, echoing him from earlier. "Get it out before you choke."

His jaw clenched.

"I remember a night in Laure," Hakram said, "when Vivienne almost died. Where it took a knife through my wrist to wake her up from the terrified decisions she was about to make."

I'd never got the full story of what had happened in Laure from either of them. Hakram had called it an investment in the future, she'd called it a debt. What I knew was that when I'd returned from the Everdark they had been friends instead of foes and Hakram had lost a second hand.

"Part of it was my fault," the orc said. "Mistakes I made. But the source of it is that you don't take advice, Catherine"

I glared.

"Hell of a thing to say, coming from someone whose advice I took for years," I bit out.

"You take it on lesser matters," Hakram said. "Details. But when the crossroads come, it's always a decision you make alone. By the time we're all at the table talking, the choice is already made in your head. It's dress-up."

I tried to answer but he rode over my voice without hesitation.

"It was like that when we turned against the Tower after the Doom," he said. "When we headed for Keter. When you decided to go to the Everdark. When you decided to make peace with the Grand Alliance."

A pause.

"I'm sure it was the same when you decided to have Masego cut up the Intercessor to steal her power," Hakram said. "Another decision that affected millions. Maybe you heard some people out, Catherine, let them move around a few pieces on the mosaic, but you make these calls *alone*. There is no question of you being swayed."

My fingers tightened.

"Are we getting to a point?" I said.

"You made Vivienne your conscience," Hakram said, "then like your actual conscience you browbeat and ignored her. I put some of the fear in the woman I saw that night in Laure, but not the most. What did you think was going to happen when you gave her a role only to immediately make it worthless?"

"I did not think that," I hissed. "Because apparently I'm not perfect, Hakram, who fucking knew – except *goddamn everybody!*"

The more I spoke, the more furious I became.

"You drag up things that happened years ago and parade them up like they were acts of deliberate cruelty," I said. "Like I don't make mistakes. Of course I made fucking mistakes, and of all people you ought to know: you were standing to my right while I made most of them."

I smiled thinly.

"Where was this cutting insight then?" I asked. "I don't recall ever hearing it."

I let out a scoff, stepping away from a curl of smoke.

"And maybe I don't get swayed easy," I said. "I'm hard-headed, that's on me. But I don't recall ever forbidding anyone to try. Did I ever close the door on any of those decisions, forbid someone to argue against them?"

His face was calm, but I knew him. I could see the anger in the cast of it, in the careful way he moved – as if he were afraid that going too quickly would see him lose control of his temper.

"I don't stick a course when someone shows me I'm wrong," I challenged. "If I didn't get convinced, it's not because I'm some sort of fucking legendary mule: I simply *didn't get convinced.*"

"Because we can't," Hakram said.

I glared at him, gesturing for him to get on with it.

"We cannot disagree with you, not past a certain line," he said. "That is the unspoken law of the Woe. Crossing that line gets you cut off, left behind."

"You're the one who told me I should act like was in charge of the band, on our way to Keter," I said. "And now you're complaining that I did?"

He hesitated.

"Gods, to hear you talk I was poison in the blood," I said.  
"Still am. And I'll not deny there were times I stumbled, but Burning Hells – who is it that *could* live up to your idol of the Perfect Catherine?"

My stomach clenched.

"Not me," I thickly said. "And you should have known better. I've never pretended to be more than what I am."

And if that'd never been enough, then burn him.

"You did things right too," Hakram gravelled. "That's not..."

He looked angry.

"You pull people in," he said. "And you take care of them, as much as you can, and they don't want to leave. But you pull them into your wake, not at your side."

"You had a place there," I coldly replied. "You're the one who walked away."

*So you could go play saviour*, I bit down on adding.

"But I wasn't at your side," Hakram frustratedly said. "That's what you refuse to see. I was under you."

I glared.

"Just because-"

"*Listen*," he growled. "Maybe you don't want to admit you think that way, but you do. You can love us, but you could never be in love with any of us. The way you are with Akua Sahelian. Because, unlike her, *we are not your equals*."

I rocked back, like he'd slapped me.

"This mad plan you built up around her laid it out plain," Hakram said as he slowly rose to his feet. "Even when she was a powerless prisoner, you treated her as more of a peer than us."

"Fuck you," I hissed. "For even thinking that-"

"You would have killed her for any of us," he said. "But that's not the same thing. And I'm not going to be Scribe, Catherine, not even for you. I still remember what a single aspect withering was like. What the Carrion Lord did to her, after decades together..."

*I'm not him*, I wanted to scream. *I would never have set you aside*. He shook his head.

"No," the Warlord said. "I learned her lesson. My own inheritance from a Calamity."

And that more, than the rest, had rage burn in my blood.

"You goddamn coward," I spat. "I scraped my hands raw trying to find ways we could stay together, ways to live with the changes, but what was any of it worth? I'm the one who can't be fucking swayed, Hakram? *Me?*"

Smoke billowed, as if conjured by my rising tone.

"Who is it that ran away across half the Empire before making his choice?" I said. "Who is it that sat on all of this until he left instead of just *telling me?*"

I could have fought this, fixed it. If I'd known. But instead he'd held his peace and here we were: beyond taking any of it back. Too late.

"And what should I have done?" Hakram challenged. "Asked you to change who you are?"

"YES," I shouted.

He stepped back at the vehemence of my voice.

"I would have done that, for you," I cursed. "I gave you the right to ask."

For the first time since we'd begun to talk, I saw him genuinely taken aback.

"It doesn't have to..." he hesitantly tried. "I cannot be the Adjutant, but-"

The anger went out of me at the sight. Dead in a moment, like a fire stripped of air. It was beginning to sink in, at last, that this was finished. That the page had turned.

"You were supposed to be the one who stayed," I tiredly said. "The one I'd journey on with. It's dead, Hakram."

And now they were all going to leave. Indrani to her horizons, Masego to his research, Vivienne to her kingdom and Hakram to his people. I would end this journey as I had begun it, that night my father had found me in the alley. Standing alone.

Silence hung. I was not the one to break it.

"They need me," the Warlord quietly said.

"I needed you too," I replied, knowing it was unfair. "And maybe it's the right choice you made. The principled one, whatever that's worth."

I breathed out.

"But it was still a choice," I said. "And those have prices."

"Aye," he quietly said, "they do."

His fangs clicked together.

"It doesn't have to be the end of us," Hakram said.

I felt my pulse quicken. That was it, I thought. The pus had been lanced, the ugliness dragged into the light of day so it might burn and turn to smoke. And still he offered a hand. Not quite in forgiveness, but at least in understanding. In willingness to keep on sharing a road. It would be the easiest thing in the world, I thought, to just take that offered hand and let it drag me into the current. I could see it in my mind's eye, clear as day: we would sit and talk and eat and laugh. It would be not quite like old times, but it would have the sweetness of them. An old friendship changing shape. And I craved it down to the marrow of my bone, because I could barely remember who I'd even been before Hakram had come into my life. I just recalled a lot of fear and anger, fingers tight on the grip of my sword as I watched the world from behind a blade. I'd become who I was with him at my side.

The thought of losing that for good made me nauseous.

But he'd not been wrong, to talk of rot. Of things left unsaid and how they had come back to haunt us. And worst of all was that, if I held my tongue now, I would make him right when he'd said I did not think of them as equals. As people capable of handling the bitter sting of truth. *How many times, I thought, can you build a tower on the same quicksand before it is called madness?* Once had been too much already, I thought. There were only so many times I was willing to bleed myself dry. That left only one path forward, I knew that, and yet my mouth would not move. My arms were trembling. I bit the inside of my cheek until it burned. I'd called him a coward, was I going to be the one living up to the word?

I slowly straightened my back and met his gaze head on.

"In Ater," I plainly said, "I made the choice to murder you."

His face closed. He'd known that already, I thought, but it was another thing to hear it voiced out loud.



"I had a choice between your life, my father's life, and what I thought would win us the war," I said. "And you'd avoided me, cornered me until there was no middle way. Either I took up the knife or the Intercessor won."

I smiled thinly.

"So I took up the knife," I said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"I only ended up killing one of you that night," I said. "But I made the choice anyway."

His dark eyes were unblinking.

"I'm not saying this to be cruel," I told him. "I'm saying this because you need to know that I still see that choice every time I look at your face."

I almost turned away there but stubbornness saw me through.

"And I don't regret it," I quietly said. "I didn't work as we thought it would, but it did work. And it might yet win us this war. So I don't regret it, and I'd make the same choice again."

I breathed out, slowly.

"And that's how we got here, isn't it?" I said. "Me making the choices. So I guess it's your turn now."

I looked away at last.

"I told you all I have to say," I said. "Now it's in your hands."

I searched his face but saw no answers. I might as well have been looking at stone.

"You know where I am," I said.

I limped out of the woods, leaving him behind with the roasting pig, and he did not stop me.

—

My mind felt restless for the rest of the afternoon, twisting this way and that. It was obvious enough Vivienne commented on it after we held council, though she was graceful enough not to ask how my conversation with Hakram had gone. I told her anyway.

"It's in his hands now," I said. "I don't get to decide how it ends."

She slowly nodded, visibly hesitating. She was curious but didn't want to push too far. I almost flinched at the sight. *We are not your equals*, Hakram had said. Had he been right? I led the Woe, it'd been like that from the start, but I was not their queen. I'd always thought of it as a company, not a kingdom. And while they did things for me when I asked, they were not beholden. Only it hadn't been anything as clear cut as my wearing a crown that he'd been talking about, had it?

"Vivienne," I said, "did you ever..."

Blue-grey eyes watched me patiently as I trailed off and an uncomfortable silence took hold. I wasn't sure why I'd started to speak. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to ask.

"Are we friends?" I artlessly asked.

She frowned.

"Gods," she said. "It really did a number on you, didn't it?"

"That's not an answer," I said.

Vivienne sighed.

"Of course we're friends," she said. "You're one of the most important people in my life, Cat. In some ways the most. You can't use you and Hakram as a measuring stick for everyone else."

I leaned back into my seat.

"And why's that?" I asked.

She looked at me for a long time.

"He's first person you ever really trusted, isn't he?" Vivienne quietly asked.

My fingers clenched. I did not answer.

"Maybe the only person you ever trusted, at least that deeply," she said. "It always cuts deeper when it's closer to home, Catherine."

"He said things," I admitted, "that I'm not sure are wrong."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Vivienne said. "The one blind spot he's had as long as I've known him is his relationship with you."

*Maybe you're right*, I thought, *but that doesn't mean he's wrong*. I shook myself. The coin was still spinning. There were greater concerns to speak of.

"I don't like that we're not sure what the First Prince is planning," I said, changing the subject.

Vivienne tactfully went along with it.

"I think she knows she loses if she does nothing so she's rolling the dice," the Princess said. "It explains why the Jacks have seen her reach out to princes. She'll be going to the hero council in force, with her backing there to impress."

I wasn't sure how much having the princes behind her would impress heroes, but having the armies those few represented supporting her might sway some. Enough to beat Hanno on his own stage?

"I don't think that's enough for her to win," I said. "Or even tie. And that begs the question that we've avoided voicing out loud so far."

Vivienne grimaced.

"What does the First Prince do if she sees she's lost?" she asked.

I had a great deal of respect for Cordelia Hasenbach, but I was not blind to her occasional bouts of ruthlessness. On the contrary, they were part of why I respected her. The problem was what that ruthlessness might lead her to do, if she thought Hanno was about to become Warden of the West and doom us all. I liked to think that the Lycaonese princess would be careful of avoiding doing anything that might destroy our chances at taking Keter, but she was desperate. Cornered. That was not when people made their finest decisions, claimants especially. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"I can't just show up and tell them to play nice," I said. "I almost want to, Viv, but it'd be too direct an intervention. I'd get a rap on the knuckles from Above for sure and my lot isn't in any position to ensure that love tap doesn't disintegrate my entire arm."

"It might be out of our hands, Catherine," Vivienne said. "I know you don't like the thought, and to be honest I don't either, but--"

"-it might be a situation where acting has worse consequences than not acting," I completed. "Yeah, the thought's occurred."

We talked a while longer after that, but there were only so many words to say. My problem was that the two of them had moved quicker than I thought but I couldn't actually do anything about it. And I'd yet to reconcile with Hanno, which as Indrani had pointed out might turn to be a problem if he became Warden of the

West tonight. *And I'm not sure I liked the idea of going after Keter with unfulfilled oaths.* Seemed like the kind of mistake Neshamah would use to bury me. We sent out spies and feelers and tried to get a grasp on what was happening as I struggled to find a way out of the mess, but I couldn't find one. The well of ideas was dry and my mind was... slow, today.

By the time the sun began to dip the tension in my shoulders had metamorphosed into a knot of dread in my stomach. I'd not felt this powerless in a while and it was never a feeling I'd enjoyed. Which was, naturally, when Akua chose that moment to reappear. I'd not seen her in two days. She came and went as she wished, and I had no call on her hours. She might be one of my advisors once more, but I knew better than to try to ask too much of her. It might just give her the reason to leave I suspected she was still looking for.

The balcony where I'd been wracking my brain overlooked a small statuary garden where servants had already lit lanterns, though I'd come out here more for the fresh air than the view. Akua drifted in through the room behind me with the same gliding grace she'd had as a shade, bringing with her two glasses of wine. She pressed one into my hand and came to lean against the stone railing, sipping at her own. No jewelry, I saw. Not that she needed any: even in the simple red and gold gown she wore, Akua Sahelian had the presence of a queen.

"It promises to be a beautiful night," she said.

I sipped at the wine. Red and full-mouthed, a little too bitter for me. From Cantal, maybe? There were so many damned wines in Procer that I could spend a lifetime learning and still miss a few.

"I can't afford to savour it," I said. "There's trouble in the distance."

"I heard," Akua languidly replied. "The Sword and the Princess rushing their conclusion, is it?"

I nodded.

"And I'm sure the Bard has her fingers in it too," I grunted. "Not put there recently, I don't think she can do much except mute Below's stories right now, but this has her scent all over it."

"The spoiled liquor stench is rather distinctive," Akua noted.

I snorted, but the amusement passed quickly.

"I'm no sure what I can do," I admitted.

"It is their choice to hurry the confrontation," Akua said. "A mistake I would expect of Hasenbach, but less so of the Sword of Judgement. He should know that power left to ripen is all the fuller for it."

"They both think the other will fuck it up," I sighed. "So they're pushing hard. And I'm starting to think this one is just a loss."

Golden eyes turned to me, curious.

"I think I might be able to nudge it one way or another," I said. "I have just the right leverage for it. So what's left is picking whoever I think is the better candidate."

"Yet you consider that a defeat," Akua said.

"Because the Bard gets what she wants," I replied. "We lose something. The Warden of the West is weaker, maybe it screws us against Keter down the line. Why the Intercessor would want that I can only guess, but I hate giving it to her anyway."

"I have come to believe," Akua murmured, "that the Intercessor's designs are best grasped by who she chooses to move."

I flicked her an interested glance.

"You were only moved against when you became a threat," the golden-eyed sorceress said. "So you can safely be considered to be inconsequential to her actual plan. As far as I can see, her actions cluster around three souls: Kairos Theodosian, Hanno of Arwad and Cordelia Hasenbach."

One dead, two now claimants and at odds.

"So you think this conflict is larger," I said.

"I am not yet sure," Akua gracefully shrugged. "But ultimately it is irrelevant."

"There's a bold take," I drily said. "How's that?"

"Because," Akua calmly said, "this is beneath you."

I raised my glass.

"Evidently not," I said, "else I wouldn't be here."

"This... fatalism," she said. "The pretence that you are bound to let your enemy's scheme succeed. It is beneath you."

"I can't intervene, Akua," I bit out. "If I could-"

"So find another way," Akua said. "Has that not been your favourite trick since the very beginning?"

She waved amusedly.

"Cornered is when you are most dangerous, dearest," she said. "When they have you surrounded by dead ends. The pit has always been, Catherine, where you shine."

I looked away.

"Well's run dry," I said, oddly ashamed. "I have nothing."

"I don't believe that's true."

Irritated, I turned to glare but was caught by a soft smile instead.

"You have been burned," Akua said. "And now you hesitate. Discard this."

She circled the rim of her glass with a finger.

"Let the fear fall away and you will find an answer," Akua said. "You always do."

I breathed out shallowly.

"Why are you helping?"

I'd been the one, I realized, to ask the question. Golden eyes studied me.

"Do you know," Akua asked me, "the difference between a knot and a noose?"

"There isn't," I said. "A noose *is* a knot."

"Only," she smilingly said, "if there is a corpse."

I blinked in confusion. I was missing something here, a kernel that would allow me to understand.

"I will choose what it is I do," Akua said. "Not you. Not her. Not my mother's shade. *Me*."

She leaned in closer, and warm lips were pressed against the side of my neck. I shivered.

"Now go, Catherine," she said. "Go out there and win."

She left and took the warmth she had brought with her. I stayed out there on the balcony, alone with my silence. Thinking for the Gods only knew how long.

Huh.

Maybe I did have an idea, after all.

—

Three hours later the sky opened as the wind howled around me. High Lady Abreha had been accommodating when I'd decided to use one of the assets brought from Ater early, not even asking why. As the clouds parted and light danced across the sky, I sat on the throne atop the great tower as it began crashing towards the ground north of the capital. The air screamed around us and the night crackled with thunder, sorcery lashing out around us in great flares. It wasn't quite a flying fortress, those would come with the second wave, but the sight of this cutting across the night sky certainly ought to catch people's attention.

And when had heroes ever been able to resist poking at a beehive?

## Chapter 38: Salvo

*"It's a matter of principle for me never to have railings built on anything, Chancellor. It saves on both construction costs and retirement pensions."*

— Dread Emperor Inimical, the Miser

The flying tower hit the ground with a thunderous sound, earth rippling and breaking under the impact as we 'landed'.

It was like an old god had just had a slugging match with the earth, and it sure as Hells wasn't the earth winning. The foundations of the tower stolen from the broken remnants of Ater groaned, their reinforcing enchantments struggling with the load, but in the end they held. Not that you could tell there'd been doubts, from my comfortable throne under the stars. The viewing platform was so heavily warded not even a gnat could come through without permission and not so much as a shake had made it to my seat. I leaned back against the cushion, sipping at the Vale summer wine I'd sent for. Iridescent strands of magic still skittered across the sky, announcing our presence to anyone who cared to look.

Well, that and the massive amount of Night I'd been accumulating for the better part of an hour now. I figured even onlooking angels had to be a mite worried about that, given that there was now so much of the power roiling around me that the tower itself was beginning to be wreathed in shadow. I figured it'd make for a nice touch, you know, when the heroes showed up: dying lights above, a desolate empty plain around us and a lone tower swallowed by writhing, malicious darkness. The war had killed or seasoned all our greenhorns, but I figured that a few of the

younger ones ought to balk at least. I finished my glass and set it down a pearl-encrusted table.

"If I were a maniacal laughter kind of girl," I noted, "that would have been a good time for it."

"Wow," Archer said, sounding impressed. "The power is going *straight* to your head."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"It's kind of hot," she admitted. "It's a Praesi flying tower, you know, so I'm sure if we look there's gotta be a least one revealing dress to-"

I raised a hand at the height of my chest.

"This is where you are right now," I said, then waited a beat. "And this is the expendable asset zone."

She squinted at me.

"You didn't move your hand," she pointed out.

"No, I did not," I pleasantly smiled. "So are you *sure* that downwards is the direction you want to keep digging?"

I'd never gotten to throw anyone down a tower before. I felt like doing it at least the once would allow me to better understand the people that I represented as Warden of the East, which was definitely the main reason I wanted to do that and not because it seemed like everyone else had gotten to. Just in case I began eyeing the rampart and working out the angles.

"Message received," Archer cheerfully replied.

She then knelt and made a melodramatically sombre face, because she'd always been a wench and always would be.

"What are your orders, Your Dark Mistragesty?" she sinisterly asked.

Wait, had she just pushed together mistress and maj- *no, Catherine, don't let yourself be sucked into her pace.*

"I need you to go to the edge of the rampart and look at how long we've got before they show up," I said, then paused. "Also, send for a refill. My glass is empty."

Indrani eyed me skeptically.

"And you can't walk the like ten feet to the edge of the wall to look yourself, because..." she trailed off.



My lips thinned.

"Disloyalty is severely punished in this outfit, wench," I warned her.

She studied me for a long moment, then suddenly grinned.

"You can't get up, can you?" Indrani said.

Shit.

"Of course I can," I lied.

"Do it," she challenged. "Just for two heartbeats. Do it and I'll speak entirely in rhyme for an entire month."

I shifted in my seat.

"Look," I defensively said, "it's not my fault the mages built this damn thing so that all the channelling arteries end up right under the throne. If I stop touching it-"

"You lose control of a bunch of the power you've gathered," Archer said grin, widening. "Oh Gods, you're literally stuck in that seat until they show up aren't you?"

"How far are they?" I whined. "The back of my knee itches and I don't want to have to take off the armour bending around on the chair."

"You're a tragedy," Indrani amusedly told me.

She went to have a look, though, so I let it pass without censure.

"So?"

"We've got a dozen riding hard our way," Archer said. "And that cloak is pretty hard to mistake: Shiny Boots is in the lead."

I hummed.

"Is the Witch of the Woods with them?" I asked.

"I would have mentioned the giant monster wolf, Cat," she snorted.

Good. We'd been pretty sure she wouldn't be there, since she was supposed to be fixing a breach in the wards up north, but it was hard to be sure with her. The Witch avoided cities and even towns like the plague whenever she could, so it was even more difficult to keep track of her than your average Named. I'd had a backup plan in case she did end up being there, but I was happier not having to use it. Since Cordelia had taken to using the ealamal

like a goddamn party trick the boundary with Arcadia had damned hard to breach in the region. *Tabula rasa*, Masego called the effect. Pissing angel light all over the land fixed the accumulated damage in the fabric of Creation.

Two breaches in a single evening would have taken more out of me than I'd like.

"The First Prince?" I pressed.

"Nowhere in sight," Indrani said. "Told you it was long odds."

I waved a hand.

"She's not the one I want to talk to anyway," I said. "And I've already gotten most of what I want."

"Breaking up a party," Indrani solemnly said. "Shame on you, Cat. You used to be fun."

"It was a Good party," I argued. "They would have all drunk responsibly and there'd have been no brawling."

Except for the Levantines, I mentally corrected. They *definitely* would have drunk too much and brawled. Indrani snorted, then her eyes turned serious even as the smile remained.

"You think it'll be enough?" she asked. "It's not even half of them riding here."

I suspected that probably had more to do with the number of horses fit for a hard ride they'd had on hand than interest, but that hadn't been the thrust of her thought.

"Hanno left," I said. "That kills his plan as well as whatever Hasenbach was cooking up to match him."

"He could just do it tomorrow morning," Indrani said.

*I'll have gotten my licks in before then*, I thought. I still answered, because it would have been arrogance to assume what I intended was guaranteed to work.

"A repeat?" I dismissively shrugged. "He's free to try. Won't have the same weight, though. I stole that by slapping down a gauntlet through the clouds and daring him to pick it up. My bet is he'll push it back a day or two, trying to gather momentum again, but by then it'll be a different game."

"It's coming close to supporting Hasenbach," Archer said.

I smiled, cold and lean.

"If she gets something out of tonight, good for her," I said. "But I'm not doing it on her behalf. When I laid down the gauntlet, I was completely serious."

Archer slowly nodded.

"You'd really do it?" she asked.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"I will, 'Drani," I said. "If Hanno doesn't give me a good reason not to, I'll eat the Book of Some Things."

I'd not gathered all this Night on a lark. Indrani hummed.

"At this rate," she told me, "Shiny Boots and attendants will be there in two hours."

I cursed in Mthethwa.

"You're going to have to help me out of my armour," I told her. "And send for the damn bottle, would you?"

—

A warband of heroes approached my tower on half-dead horses.

Picking out the faces and Names, they'd come ready for a fight. They had the steel: Vagrant Spear, Mirror Knight, Myrmidon, Bloody Sword and Valiant Champion. A balance of Light and magic for their backline: Forsworn Healer, Blessed Artificer, Apprentice and the Wise Astrologer. Then a pair of specialists, the Bitter Blacksmith and the Painted Knife, with Hanno himself the last of the lot. Exactly twelve in all. They rode across the yellow grass towards the tower's gate, their silhouettes cast in moonlight as shadows roiled before them.

Twelve heroes to the seven villains lying in wait. Most of them of better calibre too. It was a good thing I had no intention of picking a fair fight.

I was watching them all through eyes of Night I'd seeded into the writhing darkness embracing the tower, using it as cover. At a long distance I'd been forced to rely on Indrani's eyes, but up close these would do just fine. Hanno was leading them to the gate, in front with the Astrologer and the Champion, but aside from that they were pretty loosely arranged. Most of the Levantines were clustered in the back, talking excitedly in one of their languages as they pointed at the tower. The Sword of Judgement rode ahead of his two companions, white cloak trailing behind him as he stared up with hard eyes.

"Warden of the East," he called out, "open your gates. You owe explanation."

I snorted, up on my throne, as I began to mould the Night within the tower. Yeah, like that was going to work. I still couldn't leave my seat, but thankfully I had assigned a gatekeeper. He'd gotten his latest orders from Indrani, who had proclaimed herself my herald safe in the knowledge that I couldn't get up to contradict her. Given even that minute amount of authority she had immediately become a hedonistic tyrant, as everyone even remotely knowing her had seen coming. Still, I did wonder how Ishaq was going to interpret 'slow them down, without fighting if possible'.

"To pass this gate," a ghastly voice answered from an arrowslit above the gate, "you must answer my riddles three."

Goddamnit, Ishaq. The Barrow Sword had been handed an enchanted necklace that'd lace his voice with horror, an old Praesi favourite, but that wasn't going to be enough to carry this. There was a pregnant pause from the heroic side. Getting the Night in place was taking longer than I'd thought it would, even with the tower mostly emptied so I wouldn't have to worry about collateral damage. He better keep them busy for a while still or this wasn't going to work.

"We won't be doing that," Hanno politely replied. "Stop trying to buy time and open the gate."

"Lord," the Vagrant Spear cut in, sounding appalled.

All the Levantines except the Painted Knife, who was rolling her eyes, seemed to agree. Sidonia looked up at the arrowslit.

"Speak your riddles, gatekeeper," the Vagrant Spear called out.

... I took it back, Ishaq had at least a vague idea of what he was doing. He began to give them his first riddle and I kept half an eye on the situation as I continued moulding the Night, layering it carefully, and noticed that the Wise Astrologer was quietly talking with the Apprentice. Who looked a little uncomfortable as he nodded. Ugh, the Astrologer. She was barely even a mage, I was pretty sure at least half a fraud, and I didn't care that – the older Ashuran heroine pointed her finger, the Apprentice's magic flashed in fire and I lost one of the Night eyes I'd hidden. I lost another four in quick succession, almost half the ones I'd seeded. My flesh eye narrowed.

"Dicer," I spoke into the Night. "Hit the Astrologer."

The Pilfering Dicer was a rather minor villain I'd assigned to the First Prince's service after having disciplined him for bad behaviour. He had, you see, stolen luck from my soldiers. That was his trick, stealing luck from others. And tonight, with no story hanging above our heads to punish us for overstepping, I had no hesitation in using him against heroes. I got a hesitant

nod from the young man in reply and he dipped into his Name a moment later. Three heartbeats later, the Astrologer's horse saw something move in the grass it got spooked. She got shaken right off the saddle, landing on her back with strength enough it would bruise.

I coldly smiled.

"Well done," I praised through the Night, even as Hanno's face hardened.

"That was an attack," he called out at the gate. "I felt it. Enough of these games."

Even as the Levantines protested he bared his sword, but he was just a little too slow. The Mirror Knight had already dismounted, and with a few quick strides he stood before the steel-barded gates of the tower. Sighing, he took a sharp step forward and slammed his helmeted head into the gate. It groaned. Another and it cracked. A third and it broke. On the fourth, the steel bars keeping it closed snapped and the gate flew open. The human-shaped battering ram took a step back, brushing away wooden shards.

"There," Christophe de Pavanie said. "Shall we get on with it?"

That was a little impressive, but the Barrow Sword had done exactly what I'd asked of him: he'd bought me enough time to finish my preparations.

"Cursed are you who broke the pact of entrance," Ishaq told them in that horrifying voice. "You will know no rest in this world or the next."

Now that was just dedication to the job, I approvingly thought. Even better, some of the Levantines looked like they were taking him seriously.

"Astrologer?" Hanno asked.

"I've never seen so much Night in one place before," the Ashuran told him, grimacing. "It is difficult to tell what it is meant for."

"Then we press on," Hanno grimly replied.

"I could hammer at the tower," the Blessed Artificer offered, "I have prepared-"

"Warning shot," I ordered through the Night.

The black arrow streaked down, landing less than a hair's breadth away from the end of Adanna of Smyrna's left foot. She wore good leather boots, but not so good they'd stop an arrow fired by

Archer. She yelped and flinched away, but it wasn't her I'd been looking at. Hanno's eyes narrowed. A message received, then. I was only going to play nice so long as they did. The moment the gloves came off for them, I stopped holding back.

"We press on," Hanno repeated, voice firmer. "Prepare yourselves, we are awaited."

They must have talked tactics on the ride over, because they got into a formation without much jostling. Hanno and the Mirror Knight in front, Champion and Myrmidon out back, their strikers distributed according to range and their most vulnerable Named safely encircled by steel. It was pretty well thought out, I noted as they passed the threshold of the broken gates and entered the bottom floor of the tower. It'd be difficult to crack in a fight, especially considering the small number of villains I'd judged safe to bring into this. A shame for them it wouldn't matter. Within a heartbeat of the entire warband having ventured into the dark, I pressed down with all my might and the Night I'd been moulding obeyed.

There floor under their feet broke and all of them were dropped into Arcadia. Separated.

And best of all, I could finally get up from the throne.

—

I'd not known for sure how many would come, so ten cells had seemed a safe bet.

Not that I meant 'cells' in the sense of iron bars, of course, since throwing a hero in a dungeon was a recipe to have them rampaging all over your fortress before the day was done. I had instead made sure that they ended up in different, distant parts of Arcadia. The difficulty was that I needed to move them towards one destination or another while they were transitioning, and naturally the opiated little bastards fought me over it. Fine, it wouldn't be a perfect spread then. I'd still mostly get my way.

I dropped the Myrmidon and the Bloody Sword on a sunny island in the middle of a deep lake, keeping a single eye on them from the shadow of the trees. Neither was hurt, and I could now consider them pretty much out of the game: both of them were a whirlwind of pain when you let them get in lose, but they had no mobility trick and no deep experience with Arcadia. Let them swim their way to the shore and wander around, it'd take them hours and even providence couldn't magically bring them to another hero able to guide them.

I tossed the Painted Knife into a swamp near a fae tower, betting that she'd get curious and waste her time there. If allowed to

wander she had the potential to be a pain, as a stealthy Named, but between the mud and the distraction she should keep out of my hair. The Blessed Artificer would need careful handling, so I dropped her into a natural well. It was a deep stone shaft with even deeper water at the bottom, in a mountain valley, so while she was in no real danger she'd have to be careful about blowing her way out if she didn't want to bring half a mountain down on her head. Most likely she'd burn through a bunch of her smaller Light trinkets to carve steps, which I had no issue with. While it might be the massive workings that made her a real threat, in practice she only had a handful of those to call on. Disarming her of the rest would do much to box her in.

The Forsworn Healer was the first to fight me off successfully. I'd meant to dump him in the middle of an open and empty plain, let him wander around, but my nudge was slapped aside and he clung to the Valiant Champion instead. That wasn't great, I thought, but neither was it horrible. I'd sent her into the broken echo of an old battle, the massacre of some Alamans tribe by what had to be Triumphant's ancient Legions of Terror, and while the ghosts wouldn't be able to hurt them getting out of a shard like that could be tricky. The Healer might be able to guide them out, though, so the Champion would be back in play sooner than I would have liked.

That could be dealt with.

"Harrowed Witch," I called out.

The answer came promptly through the Night.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Draw fae to the battlefield shard," I ordered. "That hunting party out in the woods ought to do nicely."

Only one noble there, Indrani had told me, and not a powerful one. Even if one of them did end up wounded, well, they had a healer along. Hopefully they'd enjoy tangling with a pack of fae in the middle of what was essentially a violent illusory field, I thought with just a drop of viciousness. I did manage to split the Astrologer and the Apprentice, putting my back into it, but the fucking Astrologer managed to wiggle her way into falling along with the Vagrant Spear. I'd chosen for them low hills that looked like Twilight, banking on confusion, but that wouldn't work. And the Astrologer pointed at my eyes within moments, the Spear killing them in bursts of Light.

I'd lost sight on them, which was potentially problematic.

The Apprentice I nudged towards a beautiful golden apple orchard, since she was a good kid and she'd looked a little hungry. She, uh, fell through a bunch of branches on her way down which I'd

not meant her to but she seemed to walk off with only bruises. I'd known from the start that moving the Mirror Knight would be like trying to punch a rock barehanded, so him I just let fall straight down. He landed on an old raised stone, which he cracked bouncing off, and got his footing almost immediately. Already he'd be able to see my tower's Arcadian reflection in the distance, but I had plans to slow him down.

A heartbeat after him the Bitter Blacksmith followed him down, landing in the grass with a thump. The Mirror Knight would be able to run full tilt the whole way to the tower in full plate, he was that kind of ridiculous, but the Blacksmith definitely could not. She was built like one of her trade: for effort, not long runs. Christophe wouldn't abandon her alone in Arcadia, so they'd be moving at her pace instead of his. It wasn't perfect, but it bought me time. And time was what I needed, I thought as I angled Hanno for his own fall. Light flared for a moment as he burned away the Night, but a heartbeat later he realized I was sending him exactly where he wanted to go and stopped.

Like a falling star, white cloak trailing behind him, the Sword of Judgement fell before the roiling darkness of my tower. Knees bending as he landed in crouch, he rose smoothly with his sword in hand and did not bat an eye before beginning to advance. Best get the reception ready, else he'd be on me before I'd finished the last of my preparations.

"Barrow Sword," I spoke into the Night. "Entertain our guest."

"Of course," Ishaq lightly agreed. "Rules?"

"Nothing permanent," I said. "Withdraw if it gets too heated."

"Understood."

I moved my will through the Night, finding another villain.

"Hunted Magician," I said.

"You have my attention, Warden," the man easily replied.

"The Barrow Sword and our favourite guest are about to fight in the gatehouse," I said. "Be a dear and shoot the White Knight in the back while he's busy, would you?"

I got a delighted laugh back.

"Your Excellency," the Hunted Magician replied, "it will be my very great pleasure."

I didn't even bother to tell him to keep it nonlethal. The Magician was a predictable sort of a creature: he'd not want to risk the backlash of killing Hanno even if I *had* given him such an order. That ought to keep Shiny Boots busy for a while, even



if it'd definitely not turn him away. Opening my eye, I ripped off the globe of Night I'd burrowed my head in and dispersed it. The strands of darkness slithered around my skin, going down below my seat where the channel would lead them to the heart of the tower. The preliminaries were finished, all the forces in movement and accounted for. I could begin my ritual with a degree of assurance that I wouldn't be jumped.

Finally, I rose from my throne. Reaching out with my hand without looking, I found my staff of yew waiting. Rolling my shoulders, I adjusted the Mantle of Woe and began limping my way to the stairs. Barely three steps in, there was a tug at the Night. I flicked my wrist and circle of Night appeared by my head as I kept moving.

"Archer," I said. "I'm listening."

"Painted Knife is loose," Indrani said. "She captured the fae tower keeper and cut off fingers until he gave her directions. She's headed straight for the tower."

Well, that'd gotten out of hand impressively quick.

"She's still in the swamps, right?" I asked.

"Yeah," Indrani replied. "I'm keeping an eye on her from a distance."

"I'll handle it," I said. "Astrologer and Vagrant Spear are in the hills and they killed my eyes, I want you to look in on them."

"Gotcha."

I'd put the Painted Knife near the edge of the swamp not only because that was where the tower was. It was also because there was a little spot of trouble deeper in. I moved my will through the Night and found the villain I was looking for.

"Dicer," I said.

"Ma'am," he replied, sounding wary.

No doubt he'd been hoping that after stepping in once he'd be able to stay out of it. The little bastard wasn't that lucky, though. At least not yet.

"Steal the Painted Knife's luck," I ordered. "As much of it as you can."

"Is it, er, all right if I run away afterwards?" the Pilfering Dicer.

"I'd actually prefer it," I honestly replied.

With a sigh of relief on his part, the conversation ended. The Dicer's little trick ought to compensate for providence enough that the house-sized and very territorial heron in the swamps would pick up on the sudden scent of blood in its territory. That ought to keep the Painted Knife busy for a while longer. I'd barely taken another three steps before Archer was tugging at the Night again.

"Cat," she said the moment the circle formed next to my head. "You sent a hunting party after the Champion and the Healer, right?"

"Asked the Witch to lure one in, yes," I corrected. "And?"

"Half of the fae are dead, they stole two horses and now they're riding out of the battle echo at a gallop," Indrani bluntly said.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Fine. Fucking fae, and to think they'd been so reliably awful when I started out. Those two were a genuine problem if they got to Hanno, they'd be able to support him well enough he'd blow straight to the chamber where I was keeping the Book. Worse, I realized as I closed my eye and visualized the path they'd be taking, they'd be coming through the plains where the Mirror Knight and the Blacksmith were walking. If they gave a horse to the Mirror Knight, this was going to head downhill real quick. Although, wait, technically to the east of them...

"Hold on a moment," I said, plunging my head into the circle of Night.

I found the eye I was looking for, the one in the swamp where the Painted Knife had landed. While I couldn't see either her or the Pilfering Dicer, I *could* see the very large and very angry red heron storming through the swamp. Yeah, that could work. I withdrew my head from the circle.

"I'm going to have the Witch light up the swamp, it'll draw their attention to a fight brewing there," I said. "Should delay them long enough."

Then I paused.

"How good at flying are herons, do you know?" I asked.

"Average, I'd think?" Indrani replied.

Yeah, I wasn't taking the chance.

"See the giant red bird?" I asked.

A moment passed.

"Found it," she replied.

"Shoot one of the wings," I said. "Something the Forsworn Healer won't be able to heal. And I still want you on the Astrologer and Sidonia when you have a moment, so keep moving."

"I hear ya, Your Dreadsome Majority."

I rolled my eye at her, even knowing she wouldn't be able to see it. Taking a wing would make it an easier fight for them, but I wasn't going to have this end in the three heroes riding the giant bird to the tower. It was easy enough to call on the Harrowed Witch and have her cast a lightshow around the swamps, which had the added benefit of making the heron *significantly* angrier. I got to the bottom of the stairs, at least, before the next set of bad news. From the Royal Conjuror, this time, whom I'd been hoping to keep back until the last moment.

"Your Excellency," the old man said. "The Blessed Artificer is drowning."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"She tried to blow her way out through the fucking mountain, didn't she?" I guessed.

"That appears to be the case," the Royal Conjuror agreed.

Goddamn Adanna. She was actually going to be the first one to take someone on my side off the board by sheer virtue of having put herself into such a bad situation. I'd kept the Conjuror near the valley as a precaution in case she got out too early, not thinking she'd get herself killed.

"Get her out," I sighed. "You won't make it back in time for the reception, but it can't be helped."

Leaving her to die would push this further than I was willing to take it. Even if it weakened my second line of defence more than I'd like. *Aspasie will have to do instead.*

"And should she attack me after she's been rescued?" the old man mildly asked.

I snorted.

"I said get her out," I replied. "Never said anything about her being conscious. Our charity has limits."

"Indeed," the Royal Conjuror lightly replied, and I would have bet good money he was smirking.

That did some to improve my mood, at least until Archer tugged at the Night again.

"Let me guess," I sighed, "they seduced the goddamn King of Arcadia and he's giving them a ride to the tower on his personal flying chariot?"

"Good news or bad news?" Archer asked.

"Good news," I said.

Could so with some of those.

"The Astrologer helped Sidonia to some strange Light trick and she shot up a pillar in the sky as a signal," Indrani said. "I'm pretty sure only two people saw it, though, the Mirror Knight and the Bitter Blacksmith. They're trying to link up, but looking at it Sidonia and the Ashuran are going the wrong way entirely."

Which would slow down the heroic battering ram even more. The hills were to the east of the region where I'd dispersed the heroes, it was very much going off-road for the pair that'd been in a straight line to the tower since the start.

"The bad news?" I asked.

"Only the Blacksmith is headed that way," Indrani cheerfully said. "The Mirror Knight is now running after the tower like it stole his glistening codpiece."

I swore. So when they'd figured there were other heroes close by good ol' Christophe had felt comfortable pawing off the Blacksmith in their general direction. That was a problem.

"Pull back to the tower," I said. "We're starting early."

"You got something in mind for handling Polished Ponce?" Archer curiously asked.

"He's shit with illusions," I said. "I'm going to have to tie down the Harrowed Witch keeping him out, but it's a worthwhile trade."

And there went my backup for the second line of defence, not that the woman in question seemed to mind. If anything, Aspasia seemed relieved when I gave the order. She'd be sitting out the rest of this, after all: her only duty would be hiding herself and making the Mirror Knight believe the tower was in another direction entirely. It was a good bet that sooner or later a comrade would run into him and help him out of the illusion, but that'd take a while. Not as long as I'd like, but that was why plans had to be kept flexible. And mine was, in a manner of speaking. See, since I knew that the heroes had kept their stories but my side didn't it was much easier to predict how events would unfold.

Like if I were to say, begin a ritual to eat the Book of Some Things?

Everyone would converge on the tower immediately and Hanno would begin smashing whoever was in his way at the time. I could have put everyone on fighting him from the start, sure, but it would have been a mistake. It would all be a single 'fight' that he'd blow through when I began the ritual and providence put a finger to the scale so he could stop me in time. And if I *didn't* begin the ritual, then providence would begin nudging every hero to get there to reinforce him in time – which was still a loss condition for me. No, much as it ran against my instinct to disperse my forces what I needed was a second line of defence after he got his. Fortunately, she was already on her way back to the tower. I would have liked for the Royal Conjuror or at least the Harrowed Witch to back Archer up, but we'd have to do without.

The butt of my staff rapped against the stone floor as I entered the chamber where all the writhing strands of Night converged, stone walls covered with carvings and runes humming with power. On a pedestal awaited an unimpressive leather-bound book. There was nothing special about it, until you noticed that no shadow seemed to be able to come within precisely seven inches of it. Mind you, for anything with a shred of a sense for power the Book of Some Things felt like a storm shoved into a teacup.

"You know," I told the Book, "there's usually rules about this. Like, don't eat unknown magic or you'll blow up. Don't double-cross devils for kicks or try to cannibalize gods."

Wood on stone, a gentle rap as I limped forward.

"Only they're not rules so much as stories," I said. "And those are out of the game, at the moment. So it's still a risk, just between you me, and I won't pretend otherwise. But it's a risk and not a *risk*, you get me?"

I leaned forward.

"So I'll admit that I'm a little curious," I murmured. "I know my teeth are sharp, but are they *that* sharp?"

I smiled, drawing back, and reached out. Strands of Night began to flow from the walls to my hand, returning to me. By my ear, I felt bare fangs as an old friend grinned her approval. I sank into the shadows one last time, and saw through my eyes on the tower. In the distance, I glimpsed riders. Coming closer. Not many, but not few. At their head rode the Kingfisher Prince, but their leading banner was not his: it was a mountain crowned in bronze on a field dark blue. The heraldry of Rhenia, the First Prince's banner. *So you're going to show up as well, Cordelia*, I smiled. *Good. It's better this way*. My eye opened and I looked down at the stolen stories of Good made into an artefact.

"Let's find out," I grinned, and the Night howled.

## Interlude: Occidental I

*"Seventy-five: you should never be too friendly or too hostile to a rival. Too friendly means you cannot put aside your rivalry to defeat a common foe; too hostile may drive them to join that very foe."*

-*"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms"*, author unknown

Hanno had already learned better than to receive that blade with a full parry: he had no intention of allowing a second notch onto the edge of his sword. Instead he nudged the blow aside, quickening his movement with Light, and stepped in close as he pivoted. His armoured elbow caught the enemy's helmeted cheek from the left, but the villain took the blow without batting an eye. Hanno danced back before a bronze-clad boot could smash into his knee, leaning back an inch to let that wicked blade pass just before his eyes. The dark-skinned hero withdrew even further, making space as his brow furrowed.

The fight was lasting longer than he'd wanted, in no small part because the Barrow Sword was proving significantly harder to handle than he'd expected. Not that the villain had announced himself, or even talked since that debacle with the riddles.

But the hellish landscape that Night had made of this tower had not been enough to obscure the identity of the man facing him, and neither had been the black paint half-heartedly slapped over a very distinct set of bronze armour. Still, Hanno would admit that the shadows were... disquieting. The way they moved just at the corner of your eye, hinting at faces and fanged maws, flapping wings and unblinking eyes. Looking at them too long was disorienting, the movements invited belief into depth and angles that did not exist – rooms seemed smaller or larger, crooked where they should be straight or flat when they were sloped.

And through the dark the Warden of the East watched them all, her intentions still inscrutable. Hanno flexed the stumps of his crippled hands, watching his opponent's loose stance. The Barrow Sword was not aiming to win, he decided, but to delay.

"This does not have to end in violence," Hanno said. "Take me to her, Barrow Sword. I will go with my sword sheathed, not to fight but to treat in good faith."

The other man watched him through the slits of the bronze helm, face impassive for a long moment until it split into a broad grin. The kind some might have called nasty.

"What if we *want* to fight, hero?"

The voice was distorted, laced with sorcery. It made the air shiver, though focus let him ignore the pull at his mind.

"I do not believe you do," Hanno evenly said. "So far your side has acted with restr-"

It was only instinct that led him to take a step to the side instead of backwards, which made the difference between life and death. The thrust of that eerie bronze sword – it felt Ligurian to his senses, but deeper somehow – cut the edge of his cheek, drawing blood from a thin wound. If he'd moved too slowly, or backwards, it would have punctured his throat.

"Your side keeps talking," the Barrow Sword snorted. "Speeches and schemes, like all that strutting about isn't what made you a load in the first place. Even now you're trying to get one over the Rhenian, like this is the world's saddest pissing match."

The villain flicked his wrist, blood slapping down against cool stone.

"Well, congratulations," the Barrow Sword grinned. "You kept at it long enough the Warden lost her temper. Get in line, Ashuran, or get stepped on."

Hanno's eyes narrowed. Light pulsed under his skin. Perhaps this was more serious a situation than he'd thought. He needed to finish this fight quickly, so he should set out bait.

"There are limits to what I will tolerate," he warned, "no matter the intentions."

The man laughed in his face, loudly and scathingly.

"Tolerate?" the Barrow Sword mocked. "You can't even get past *me*. What claim have you got on higher honour?"

That ought to do it, Hanno thought. Light flared as his back foot hit the floor, lending him an explosive start. Three steps in the blink of an eye, the villain belatedly raising his sword to strike. Parrying would be a mistake, so he did not. He bent low instead, caught the kick aimed to sweep him to the side and sent it back. The Barrow Sword's footing stumbled and Hanno smoothly rose, catching the arm holding the sword before it could properly swing back and pivoting sharply. The throw he'd learned through one of the Sages of the West flowed smoothly, the villain's armoured back slamming against the stone. Best to break the wrist of his sword arm, Hanno decided. He'd be less of a threat without the enchanted blade.

His knee was already rising when he felt magic flare behind him. It was an awkward moment, leaving him little room to maneuver. The mark of a skilled opponent. The dark-haired hero threw

himself to the side, but he was too slow by a hair: the ice spike caught the side of his leg, in the weakness of the armour, and he felt sorcery spreading through his blood. A curse. Breathing out sharply, Hanno ran Light through his veins. It was an unpleasant sensation, like skin stayed close to an open flame too long, but he would not take a risk with curses. Landing in a pained crouch, he swept through the spike with a sword stroke and parried a second as he turned to watch his fresh opponent.

A man in rich dark robes, his face obscured by a spell. Too tall to be the Royal Conjurer, though too short to be the Hierophant. *Hunted Magician*, Hanno thought. That meant old magic, heavy on curses and enchantments, with some fae learning. Behind him the Barrow Sword was getting back up.

"I will ask the same of you as I asked of him," Hanno said to the Magician. "Take me to the Warden of the East and this can still end peacefully."

"It can end right now, that is true," the Magician easily agreed. "All that's required is your surrender."

Hanno almost sighed. Was he truly going to have to fight his way to the summit of the tower before he could speak with the Warden, as if this were a Dread Empress' lair being cracked open? He opened his mouth to reply with one last offer of diplomacy but the words never came out: the air had just *shivered*. Great power was being used above him, a staggering amount of Night. And it was being used to smother something, he found, eyes narrowing. Forcefully put out a light. Instinct tugged at him urgently, insistently. Whatever it was Catherine Foundling had just begun, it could not be allowed to finish. Hanno slowly raised his sword.

"Change of plans," the Sword of Judgement told the villains. "I can no longer afford to hold back."

"Tough talk," the Barrow Sword scoffed, "but—"

Hanno moved, and there was no longer time for anyone to talk.

—

The Kingfisher Prince laid a hand on the Mirror Knight's shoulder, face taut with concentration. A moment passed and then Cordelia dimly felt it: a ripple on the pond. A murmur of water against her hand. Mere months ago, she thought, she would have felt nothing at all. Even being a claimant, she had found, was as if a veil had been lifted on some part of Creation. Like she'd been allowed to peek behind the stage and see the pierced bucket used to make the rain, the mage on a ladder making lightning. Withdrawing his hand, Frederic Goethal smiled.

"He's coming back," the Prince of Brus said. "Any moment now."



Cordelia slowly nodded.

"An aspect was used," the First Prince said. "**Aid**, you called it?"

The fair-haired man nodded.

"Most of the time it is little more than an instinct taking me where I most need to be," Prince Frederic said, "but it has some other minor uses."

More than just that, Cordelia thought. Not once since Frederic had become Chosen had soldiers he fought alongside with been routed. His mere presence seemed to be enough to turn even the greenest of levies into stubborn, tenacious veterans. Otto, in his letters, had described it as his friend being 'a nail keeping our line in place wherever he stands'. The Prince of Bremen, ever plain in speech, had a way of turning almost poetic when it came to the Prince of Brus. The close friendship between those two had been one of the few lights brought about by this war, in Cordelia's opinion.

Were Frederic a woman, she suspected they would already be wed.

She set aside the idle thoughts as the Mirror Knight came to, his blank eyes focusing on his surroundings as he took in the sight of the riders and the starlit plain.

"Hallowed," Christophe de Pavanie cursed. "I was bespelled, wasn't I?"

"We believe so," Cordelia calmly said, her voice immediately commanding his attention. "Though we did not find the caster responsible for it."

The green-eyed Chosen grimaced.

"These are the Black Queen's picked grounds, Your Highness," he said. "We won't fight anything she doesn't want us to find. I thank you for freeing me nonetheless."

"It was my pleasure," Prince Frederic dismissed.

Christophe de Pavanie quite willingly gave out every detail of how he had gotten where he stood and why, including the number of Chosen that the Sword of Judgement had led into this mess. He did not, however, speak of what she most wanted to know. Accordingly, she took the matter in hand.

"As you can see," Cordelia said, "we come late to the evening. Can you tell us what happened to rouse the Warden of the East to such anger?"

Though it would make a great many things easier if it were a blunder by Hanno of Arwad responsible, she did not truly hope for that to be the case. The consequences of a strong falling out there would send fracture lines through the Grand Alliance. *She has too many allies, too many followers*, the Lycaonese princess thought. The Blood had already expressed in private their doubts that the war could be won without her, and if the Circle of Thorns was to be believed the League of Free Cities was treating her as the main negotiating partner in the Grand Alliance.

A great many things would fall apart in a matter of days, Cordelia well knew, if the unstinting support from the most dreaded figure of their age came to an end.

"She's not angry," the Mirror Knight replied.

Cordelia hid her doubt behind a smile.

"Have you grasped something, Lord Christophe?" she asked.

The man looked frustrated, fiddling with the dark locks that his helmet kept pressed against his forehead.

"I understand I'm no friend of hers," the Mirror Knight said, "and that my judgement is held in poor esteem."

Cordelia's eyes narrowed the slightest bit. That was more awareness than she'd expected of a man of his reputation. Had his time under the Grey Pilgrim truly tempered him? When the punishment had been doled out she'd thought it nonsense, just another example of the White Knight letting off his charges with a slap on the wrist after they behaved atrociously – Christophe de Pavanie had accused the Queen of Callow of cooperating with the Dead King before mutilating a high officer of the Grand Alliance – but perhaps there had been some use to it.

"But," Cordelia prompted.

"If she really were angry, Your Highness," the younger man said, "that fortress would have landed *on us*."

She blinked in surprise.

"And while we were broken and dying," the Mirror Knight bluntly said, "she'd have sailed it back up in the clouds, where we can't reach it."

"We'd have found a way to reach up there," Frederic said, tone calm and utterly certain. "There's always a way."

"Maybe," the Mirror Knight replied, "but we haven't had to, Kingfisher. Because she landed the tower in the middle of a plain where everyone can see it, bold as you please."

"You believe this is a challenge," Cordelia stated.

His head bobbed up and down.

"If it's not a war," Christophe de Pavanie said, "it's a spar."

A look at Frederic, who was frowning thoughtfully and not disagreeing, told her he was coming around to the thought. Cordelia's gaze moved to the tall tower in the distance, the writhing streak of darkness jutting out of the starlit grass. What is Catherine meant to accomplish with all this? And there *would* be a purpose, she thought. Under the thuggish swagger and the affected drawl lay a clever, calculating mind. *You forced a fight*, Cordelia thought. *With him, and perhaps with me as well.* Was it as simple as forcing them to stand together against her?

No, it would not be. There had to be a victor, that much could not be worked around. Cordelia had combed through every historical archive she could reach when looking for possible compromises, and the only recorded instances of a Name being shared were siblings. Even the Bitter Blacksmiths, while one Chosen and the other Damned, were brother and sister. There could only be one Warden of the West, which meant that any cooperation between them – even against a common foe – could only be temporary. There must be a deeper purpose, one Cordelia could not yet suss out.

"We will not learn the answer standing here," she finally said. "We must ride to the tower."

"There's no telling what will be waiting for us there, Your Highness," the Mirror Knight said. "It would be safer for you to stay behind with your soldiers. The Kingfisher Prince and I—"

"Will be escorting me to the tower," Cordelia pleasantly smiled.

The green-eyed hero turned to object, but then he caught her gaze and slowly closed his mouth. A moment passed as she watched him, unblinking, and thought of how very tired she was of having to herd Chosen instead of the man who should have been doing it all this time. His mouth stayed closed.

"Let us proceed, then," the blonde princess amicably said. "One of my retinue will cede a horse to you, Lord Christophe."

He hesitantly nodded. Her gaze turned to Frederic.

"You mentioned," Cordelia said, "that your aspect tells you where you are most needed."

The Kingfisher Prince, looking faintly amused, nodded.

"It is not always clear-cut, especially in complicated situations, but it does grant me such a sense," the Prince of Brus said.

"And where does it tell you to be now?" she asked.

He cocked his head to the side.

"South," the Kingfisher Prince said after a moment. "North to the tower pulls at well, but not as strongly."

"I saw lights south before I was bespelled," the Mirror Knight offered. "Sorcery. There might be a fight."

Cordelia took a step back from the immediate, trying to understand the broader pattern. The Chosen had been split up by Catherine as they crossed into Arcadia, likely because they were too strong a threat together. Which implied her defences were inferior to the force of heroes gathered. *So what she wants is not something that can be obtained by force.* If it were, she would have gathered more force. Should Cordelia then ignore the obvious step of gathering the separated Chosen to march on the tower together? If force was not to be the deciding factor, it would be a waste of time to...

No, that was a flawed approach. Though Catherine did not seem intent on using force to achieve her end, she had acted to prevent force being used against her. Which meant that Cordelia could obtain leverage by gathering the Chosen. It would come at the cost of time, ever the scarcest of resources in a time of crisis, but the blonde princess was likely being bought time at this very moment: no one had caught sight of Hanno of Arwad, which meant the odds were good he had already reached the tower. *She planned for that, Cordelia thought. She believes she can drive back or capture the Sword of Judgement.*

Yet, for all that Cordelia Hasenbach deeply disliked the man, she would not deny he was an exception fighter. Handling him would take time. Time enough, perhaps, for her to gather the Chosen and prepare her own attempt to resolve the situation. Eyes still on the distant tower, Cordelia breathed out shallowly. This was not so different, she thought, from the schemes of the Highest Assembly. The rules and the pieces were different, but Cordelia had not been born knowing the rules of the Ebb and Flow. She had learned them, as she would learn the rules of Named.

"Then let us ride south," Cordelia Hasenbach smiled, "and lend our comrades a hand."

—

The stairs were hungry.

Or at least the Night slithering atop them. Something was coiled and ready to strike at his back just out of his sight, a sense of hostility like an itch between his shoulder blades. Hanno rose carefully, sword in hand and eyes ever moving. He had defeated the gatekeepers, which meant even deeper peril now awaited him. Either the Warden's own right hand or some kind of bound creature. Most likely the former, as Catherine Foundling had never known to use any monster save the ones she rode. Either the Hierophant or the Archer, Hanno believed. Vivienne Dartwick was not a villain or the kind of woman to lend her hand to this, and would be a lesser threat even she were.

The Princess was not as skilled a combatant as the rest of the Woe, and likely never would be. If that sort of confrontation had been in her nature, she would never have become the Thief. Besides, she was to be Queen of Callow one day. Catherine would not use her as sorely as she had used the two downstairs. They would live, Hanno knew. The Barrow Sword's leg could be reattached with a spell before he bled out, and the Hunted Magician would be able to cast when he finished swallowing his teeth. Hanno had broken his fingers, not his wrists, it should be enough for the man to be capable of basic healing.

Hanno's boots scuffed the stone as he passed the threshold to the second level, finding it to be a single large hall. Ornate reliefs of stone depicting devils slaying each other dripped with liquid shadow, though he saw that the shadow dripped up as well as down. There was an open gate on the other side of the hall and not a sign of anything here aside from the Night. The dark-skinned hero paused.

"This is a trap," Hanno plainly said.

"Trap," a voice behind him agreed, just as the arrow went through his back.

Bitting down on a hiss of pain, he turned even as he considered the angle the arrow had punched through the plate at. Not just behind, but – Archer's boots hit his face as she finished leaping down from above the gate he'd entered through, sending him tumbling in a pained tangle of limbs. A detonation of Light against his side slowed the spin, allowing him to land in a controlled skid, but it also pushed the arrow deeper. Archer landed gracefully, coat fluttering as she nocked and loosed another arrow in the span of a single breath. His body was already moving, but he corrected in time with another burst of Light. Not a single arrow but too, the second fired just as he began to move to swat away the first.

He angled himself so the first would miss and he could parry the second, narrowly. Archer sighed.

"You're too quick in a small room," she said. "A bow won't work."

"If I had not adjusted," Hanno evenly said, "that second shot would have gone through my eye."

"I aimed for the one opposite Cat's," Archer cheerfully informed him. "You know, to fit the whole opposite Wardens thing."

A short pause, a brazen grin.

"You're welcome."

Of all the Woe, Hanno had always disliked the Archer the most. Even the Adjutant, for all his moral void and bland antipathy, was no match for the casual cruelty Archer delighted in. That she could be charming when she wished to be only made it worse, as it drew the eye away from the viciousness of her words and deeds. People, even those who should know better, forgave much of a witty woman in good humour. Hanno would not have made that mistake even if he did not have an arrow jutting out of his back. *It went through plate like butter and made not a sound. Dangerous.* He broke the arrow's shaft but left the head in the flesh. He could fight through the pain, it was better to wait for proper healing.

"This has gone on for long enough," Hanno curtly said. "Whatever grievance the Warden of the East has, there were better ways to handle it. If this does not end now, it will have consequences."

The Archer casually tossed away her bow and loosed her quiver's strap. There was something wrong, something off. His eyes followed her, trying to find a match for what his instincts screamed.

"Consequences, huh," the Archer said. "You know, Shiny Boots, I argued you'd make the finer Warden but the more you talk the more I think this was the right idea."

"This is sheer stupidity," he harshly retorted. "The-"

"Nah, this is just a slap across the face," the Archer cut in, amused. "You're not meant to *like* it. Sheer stupidity, now, that'd be trying to dig up a dwarven gate on the sly."

He went still in surprise.

"Of course we know, Hanno," Archer smiled. "We're the fucking Woe. Always assume we know."

They'd been seen through, then, despite their best efforts. Did the First Prince know as well? It had been her he meant to fool.

"So that's why," Hanno said, almost relieved. "Then this is a misunderstanding. I never int-"

"Eh," Archer shrugged, unsheathing her longknives and idly spinning them. "I don't really care."

His jaw tightened. She was baiting him.

"Then there is no more point in speaking to you," Hanno said. "This is my last warning, Archer: get out of my way."

"Shiny Boots," she patiently said, "you must be confused. Do I look like someone who gives a shit about-"

Evil's stories might be silenced, but a gloater was a gloater. He burst into movement while she was jeering, but he saw from the lack of surprise in her eyes that he'd not taken her aback. Unfortunate. He wouldn't be able to end this quickly. He struck first, high and to the side, not committing to the blow. She gave ground lightly, circling him, and continued to give it the more he pressed forward. Hanno took a step towards the gate, testing her, but she did not get in the way. She wouldn't force herself to engage on his terms even if he feigned the intention of going up without first putting her down. Archer was the most seasoned villain he'd fought since the Black Knight, and promised to be just as much of a headache.

Fine. He'd strike properly, then. His boot hit the floor and Light flared as he shot forward, feinting low and to the side to draw her blades. One did sweep down, lazily, but as he moved into his true blow – a deep thrust at belly height – she darted towards him. One moment her stance had been entirely loose, the heartbeat after her entire body was moving. Sensing the danger he hastily moved to the side, a razor-sharp blade harmless skidding against the side of his plate instead of plunging through his armpit, and shifted his footing so he could swing at her back. He'd expected her to dodge by rolling forward, using her momentum, but instead she dropped down.

The edge of his sword whispered just above her hair as she tried to sweep his legs. She was strong and the angle bade for him, so he took a step back just in time for her to rise into a blow at his throat. An opening, she'd overcommitted: he slammed his pommel onto her hand, forcing her to drop the longknife and was about to break her jaw on the second blow when he saw the glint of steel from the corner of his eye. He leaned back, the blade slicing through his cheek and lip, and before he could kick her in the stomach she darted back. But not, he saw, without first snatching up her dropped knife. Hanno's hand came up to touch the side of his face, coming away red.

He could feel the blood going down his cheek, dripping down onto his armour. Over the white cloak.

"Those reflexes are a little much, Shiny Boots," Archer complained. "That little mistake should have cost you an eye."

She was a skilled combatant, Hanno thought, but not *this* skilled. She'd exploited his propensity to close distance so he could use Light to quickly end a fight to very nearly land a crippling blow two exchanges into their fight. That had not been improvised.

"You've trained to kill me," Hanno calmly said.

"Figured I might have to, one of these days," she casually shrugged. "If you ever got ideas about Cat being more trouble than she's worth."

Even that, though, should not be enough. She was good, but those instincts were- Hanno's eyes narrowed as he studied her once more. The ease she handled those two longknives with, the way they just seemed to *fit*. Those instincts were not an Archer's instincts.

"You're becoming the Ranger," Hanno said.

"Claimant," Archer grinned, "but it's early days yet. But enough yapping, yeah? We gonna do this or-"

It did not take him by surprise when she darted forward, any more than it had taken her. He knew better than to lower his guard against Indrani the Archer. Four steps forward, quick as an arrow, and when he raised his sword she smiled. Footing switching, she suddenly drew back and if Hanno had been striking her it would have gone wide. But he was not. Instead he was taking a step forward, closing the distance, and her weight was headed the wrong way. She kept drawing away, to make distance, and it was true that by simple physical ability she was slightly faster than him. Hanno, though, did not rely on his body alone.

A burst of Light behind his left foot pushed him forward, lengthening his stride, and though it shot his footing he adjusted with another burst of Light just under his right shoulder blade. The thrust ripped through her coat at shoulder height and broke chain mail, but delivered nothing more than bruises. Archer had reacted quickly, dropping down towards the floor, but Hanno was not finished. His steel-clad boot caught her in stomach, slamming her against the stone with a pained gasp. He heard one of the lower ribs break. She wore no gauntlets, the Sword of Judgement thought as his sword rose. Cutting through both wrists should end this.

Instead he had to duck back, a longknife spinning through where his face had been a heartbeat earlier, and she rolled back into a crouch. He pressed a step forward, ignoring the knife still in the air, but she darted back before he could close the distance. Her eyes weren't even on his sword, he noticed, but on his footing. *She's watching for the Light*. The acceleration trick would not take her by surprise twice. Still, the exchange had cost her a broken rib and half her longknives – which he heard



clatter against the stone behind him. This was not going to end quickly, as he had feared, so he'd used Light to melt the knife she had thrown. It should tip the balance in his favour.

It would be close, Hanno thought, but he would get to the Warden of the East in time. He could feel it in his – a wet, red gasp passed through his lips. Pain in his back. He'd been struck through his armour? *No, the arrow. Something used the opening.* Gritting his teeth, he flared Light at his back only for it to be swallowed. Devoured. Blood turning cold, Hanno turned even as he felt the spike impaling his back beginning to raise him off the ground.

Catherine Foundling, one-eyed and smiling, met his gaze.

"Did you really think you'd just get to fight your way up to me one brawl at a time?" she said. "Really, Hanno, I'm *insulted*."

There was a swell of power, of Night, and after a wave of pain all Hanno knew was darkness.

## Interlude: Occidental II

*"Intelligence, Chancellor, is understanding that alligator moats never work against heroes. Cleverness is paying an alchemist for water-coloured acid instead."*

– Dread Emperor Venal

The world was upside down.

Hanno could not recall ever waking up hanging from his feet before, at least not in his own body. It would have been disorienting even if the strands of solid shadow binding his feet weren't slowly turning, spinning his body with them. His wrists were behind his back and, he found out after flexing his muscles, tightly secured. Two layers of steel manacles and one of Night, if he was feeling it right. How characteristically thorough of Catherine. He was also, to his mild discomfort, naked from the belt up.

The room was chillier than he would like.

"Hey, look who's up," Archer's voice cheerfully called out.

Now that the spinning was allowing to see more than a screen of Night and glimpses of the stone floor, Hanno found to his mild bemusement that he was being held in what looked like a dungeon. Like spider legs on glass, he felt an instinct skitter across his mind. A wrongness. Hanno cocked his head to the side.

"Is that an iron maiden?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Archer shrugged, seated on top of the open iron cabinet full of spikes. Her legs were wrapped around the head of a screaming ghost, keeping her in place.

"Came with the tower," she told him. "You know Praesi."

Hanno did not, save through memories not truly his own. Perhaps he was lucky, considering what he was looking at. A dozen torture racks, manacles to hang people up against the wall at twisted angles and some sort of... wheel with ropes? He spent a moment trying to work out where the person would go on the device, coming away with the conclusion that no matter *where* that was the exercise would be deeply painful. He pulled at his bindings again, but the steel did not give in the slightest. He then reached for Light, but while he could sense it Hanno could not seem to *move* it.

It was as if a deep and dark pit lay between his will and the gift of Above, not forbidding contact so much as keeping out of reach. It was, he thought, a much harder restraint to break than a simple forbidding would have been. Focusing, he tried to seize the smallest possible sliver of Light.

"I have been healed," Hanno said, as silence would make his work obvious.

The absence of pain on his cheek and back had been noticeable enough, though he could not look to see if the wounds were closed.

"Some," Archer said, wagging a finger in direction. "Mostly we kept it from getting worse, so don't you go getting ideas."

It worked. Hanno felt a well of satisfaction as a mote of Light moved just as he'd willed it. *The binding is not perfect*, he thought. At a guess, there was a lower bound to the quantity of Light he could be prevented from seizing. It was a common enough weakness in workings, given that most human minds had difficulty grasping the level of precision that was the given of the divine. Carefully, Hanno moved his mote slightly to the side before releasing it. It did not move.

The turning hid his pleased smile, and it was gone by the time he was facing his captor again.

"It is traditional for one to escape when held in a torture dungeon," he reminded Archer.

"I could hamstring you if you want," she offered with a sharp smile. "It'd take care of those pesky traditions for you."

It was difficult, careful work. Hanno's forehead beaded with sweat as, one mote at a time, he wove the Light into a chord. One that was stretching out, slowly but surely, towards him.

"You haven't, though," he mused. "Why, Archer? If the Warden truly intends to devour the Book of Some Things, as you said, why would she not take all possible measures to ensure I could not get in her way?"

Catherine Foundling was giving him, Hanno thought, a shot at stopping her. A pause. No, he thought, perhaps not him alone: he would be surprised if the First Prince were not already on her way to the tower. She had the spies to learn of this and Frederic would no doubt help her.

"Do I strike you as the woman with the plan, Shiny Boots?" Archer drawled. "I'm just obeying orders."

He doubted that, but there was no point in pushing for answers she would not give. The chord lengthened and lengthened, his back shining with sweat from the work. It had been some time since he'd had to maintain so minute a focus for so long. These days his manipulations of Light tended for the large, not the small. A lesson to be learned, Hanno considered. Growing in power had caused him to lean towards the ram instead of the key when presented with a closed gate, but that might be a mistake.

A lesson, Hanno considered, brow creasing as he rotated away from his captor. Was that the entire purpose of this theatrical tantrum? To teach them a lesson? Spider legs pattered across the glass, the wrongness still crawling all over his mind. He was missing something.

"It won't work," he said. "Giving us a common enemy. Forcing us to work together."

"Shit," Indrani sighed. "You twat, I had ten silvers riding on you not figuring it out until Cordy showed up."

It should have been beneath Hanno to derive even a crumb of satisfaction from having made the smug villainess lose something, but he was only human.

"Unfortunate," Hanno lied, moving on immediately. "This is short-sighted of her, Archer. My differences with Hasenbach are not going to be ended by an evening of making common cause. We already *have* a common cause."

The Grand Alliance, and beyond that Good. Cordelia Hasenbach, however, intended to suborn heroes to laws and crowns after having spent the last few years repeatedly demonstrating that both failed to serve their stated purpose even when the stakes were the highest possible ones. Hanno simply could not understand

how someone could look at the behaviour of the Highest Assembly during and before the war then conclude that the likes of them should be given *more* power over heroes. There needed to be changes, that was true, but what was truly needed was an intermediary between Above's champions and earthly powers.

Someone who could steer away from conflicts between them, not serve as some crown-appointed governor of heroes. It simply would not work, and it *should* not: heroes often found their Names fighting against corrupt authority, it was absurd that an entire system should be built around punishing them should they do this. Absurd and doomed to failure. Named would not bend to those laws, it would run against their nature. All it would accomplish was make heroes into outlaws so that another pack of vultures could feel a little safer plotting in their palaces.

The chord was stretching ever close to him, to his will, providence's nudge making the efforts just a little easier. He must be approaching the close of his conversation with Archer, which would end with his breaking out of his bindings.

"I do not believe she is evil, Archer," Hanno said. "But we disagree fundamentally on how the world should be. That is not something over which there can be compromise and it cannot be papered over by an evening of fighting side by side."

"Well, you got us right pegged," Archer mourned. "Guess we'll just lose then."

The chord connected even as she finished the last word, Light flooding through Hanno's veins, and in the instant that followed the illusion shattered. Like a pane of glass being smashed.

Hanno was not in a dungeon and Archer was not sitting atop an iron maiden.

She was perched on a raised stone covered by runes and glyphs, an arrow loosely nocked to the bow on her knee, but it was not her the illusion had been meant to veil. It was their surroundings. They were in the great room that was the heart of the tower, the nexus where all the power converged, and here shadow dwelled like a living thing. Currents of Night flowed from channels in the walls and floor, rivers crossing the air, and everywhere copper gutters sprawled in esoteric patterns that stung his eyes. Glyphs covered every inch of stone, pulsing with something unseen that moved the tendrils of Night streaming down as if some great beast was breathing in and out.

Now that he was no longer blinded by the illusion, Hanno found the sheer amount of power flowing through the room suffocating. How was Archer unaffected? The darkness swirled lazily around her like smoke, almost playfully, and she gave no sign of feeling ill. His eyes moved past her, following the gutters inevitably

leading towards the centre of the room. There lay a raised dais, on which a pedestal had been raised. And on that pedestal a simple leather book had been set down, one that would have seemed a simple manuscript if not for the way Hanno's soul sang whenever he gazed at it. And in front of the artefact stood the third person in the tower heart.

The Warden of the East, leaning against her staff on the dais and wreathed in so much Night she seemed entirely made of it, cast a disgruntled glance in his direction and snapped her fingers. The darkness he'd woven the Light chord through deepened, grew longer, and the chord shattered in a thousand small motes. Utter surprise stilled him. That should not have been possible, Hanno knew. Night always broke when matched with Light. He'd thought his memory of it being devoured when he was captured was mistaken, that there'd been a misunderstanding on his part – an artefact had been used, perhaps.

"The fucking *Sisters* made that Light trap," Catherine Foundling said, sounding both admiring and disgusted. "And you figured a way through in, what, eighty heartbeats at most? While hanging upside down and talking the whole time."

She shook her head, muttering something that sounded like *fucking heroes* under her breath.

"We were at the good part," Archer smiled at him. "Go on, Shiny Boots, tell us more about how you've figured all this out."

He was still frozen, dripping with sweat and struggling with the surprise. Was it a trick, another illusion? *It should not have been possible for Night to do this.*

"What have you done, Warden?" Hanno harshly asked. "What is this?"

It was more than simply his own Light being suppressed, he realized. The Book he now saw, was fighting darkness encroaching from all sides. He'd not seen it at first because of the gloom, but there were thin strands of Night coming down from the ceiling and walls and trying to touch the holy artefact. They were being kept back by a presence that came in the form of an invisible globe – six, seven inches wide – but Hanno could feel the pressure against it. It was as if the entire tower and all its Night was bearing down on the Book through the tendrils, its weight slowly crushing the artefact. Snuffing out the Light within.

Night, he thought once more, should not have been able to do that. It should have dispersed, vanished, given ground.

"Are you," Catherine Foundling idly asked, "asking me to tell you all about my Evil plan?"

It would not be a deal with a devil, she saw those as beneath her. Had Below itself blessed her with strength? Hanno's stomach clenched. It was unlike the Hellgods to act so blatantly, but these were the end times. Rules grew weaker in the eyes of men and gods alike.

"How many patrons can a single lifetime fit, Catherine?" Hanno asked, hoping pricking her pride would loosen her tongue. "After this one, how many more do you have waiting in the wings?"

He got an amused glance back.

"That would absolutely have worked on me when I was seventeen," the Warden admitted.

Archer loudly cleared her throat.

"Fine," she corrected. "Maybe for a little while after too."

He was not learning anything, but even a delay was worth buying. Soon the First Prince and others would – Hanno's stomach clenched. Even as she had been speaking with him, he realized she had kept the ritual going. How? He found that sole eye watching him, amused. His thoughts must have been plain on his face.

"The first thing I did when this began," the Warden of the East told him, "was figure out a ritual that I'd be able to walk away from before it ends. Made this whole affair longer than it had to be, all bludgeon and no finesse, but that way it accounted for you crashing the party. A worthwhile trade-off, yeah?"

Good, if he could get her talking...

"If you knew I would act stop you," Hanno said, "then, on some level, you know this shouldn't be done. You can still stop, Catherine. There have been no deaths and-"

"And I'm not breaking any laws," she replied, tone mild. "Landing the tower was impolite, I suppose, but that's not why you're really here. What claim do you realistically have on the Book of Some Things, Hanno? You didn't make it and it was ripped out of the Bard, not one of your charges. It has nothing to do with you."

It was not happenstance, that Catherine Foundling had ensured she was both the Queen of Callow and the Warden of the East. It was her favourite tactic to use one title as cover for actions she took as the other: shaking Callowan swords and Grand Alliance laws at him now even as this room held more Night than he'd ever seen gathered in a single place. Bandyng words with her would be pointless, Hanno thought, she could talk in circles until the Last Dusk. Directness was the only way through, stripping the fig leaf.

"It belongs," he plainly said, "to the Warden of the West. Good's stories in Good hands."

The light of the room dimmed, shadows roiling as the invisible globe around the Book groaned.

"That's nice," the Warden of the East praised. "Good turn of phrase, very heroic."

She leaned forward, the movement casting her sharp cheekbones even more harshly. One eye under a cloth as dark as Night, the other eerily knowing. Shadows melded into the long dark hair, threaded themselves around the forlorn staff of dead yew. There was not a man or woman of Calernia that would have seen her in that moment and not known her to be Below's favourite daughter.

"Now tell me, Hanno of Arwad," Catherine curiously asked, "what exactly *is* it that compels me to obey you?"

He blinked, honestly taken aback.

"You would destroy the Accords by denying this," he slowly said. "Accords that you have-"

"No," the Warden cut in. "They'll still all sign, the nations, and they're the part that matters. Even if the heroes balk – and a lot of them won't – then most of what I want will be achieved. Try again."

Gods Above, what was this?

"You would play these games when we prepare to march on the Crown of the Dead?" he asked, incredulous.

It might be that some would sign the Liesse Accords nonetheless, as she'd said, but they could not truly succeed without the support of the heroes. If too many refused the rules, they meant nothing. What was the point of this petty posturing when Calernia teetered on the brink of annihilation? The Dead King was loose.

"Yeah, we *are* about to do that aren't we?" Archer drawled. "Cat, you must have forgot."

Hanno himself had forgot she was there. Archer was someone who called attention to herself, but she was a candle to Catherine Foundling's bonfire.

"Got distracted, I guess. Maybe it was all the concerned diplomats knocking at my door," the Warden sharply smiled. "You know, so they could tell me their worries about the pissing match between Prince White and the First Prince sinking the Grand Alliance before it even began to march."

Archer let out an overdone noise of understanding, all the while smiling like a cat playing with a crippled bird.

"Sorry, Shiny Boots, I interrupted," Archer solicitously said. "You were saying something about games, the siege of Keter coming up?"

His jaw tightened. Catherine could have been lying about the diplomats, but he doubted it. It was usually her preference to use the truth as her knife. The implied reproach was not without merit if his rivalry with the First Prince was shaking the confidence of allies to such an extent.

"How many?" Hanno asked.

"Even if it had been only one," the Warden of the East said, "it would have been too many."

That was, he considered, true. He had not been wrong to step forward and act, but he had not tended to the situation as well as he should have. Authority was trust made action, and he had been wasting trust. All involved lost from this.

"I have been at fault," Hanno frankly replied. "My error must be mended and will be."

He then flicked a hard look around him.

"But my faults, whatever they might be, excuse none of this."

"Excuse?" the Warden of the East laughed. "You seem to be misunderstanding something, Hanno. I have no need to excuse anything."

The Night in the room billowed, like cloth in the wind, as if answering its mistress's harsh laughter.

"Who is it that's going to call me to account tomorrow?" she asked. "You?"

She looked him up and down, dismissive.

"How's that working out?"

Then she gestured dismissively at the distance.

"Cordelia?" she continued. "She's so badly in my debt she'd break an entire wagon of shovels digging her way back to daylight. Besides, neither of you actually commands a damned thing."

Yet another reason the First Prince could not be the Warden of the West. She was too tightly bound to Procer and the debts of gratitude it would Callow – and that kingdom's Black Queen, even after her abdication. The one-eyed priestess shrugged.



"You've split up Procer with your Prince White business," the Warden said. "And she's got her own loyalists in the heroes. You're coming to me with threats and warnings, Hanno, while your fucking house is on fire."

A fire that would be put out the moment he became Warden of the West. The First Prince would know better than to try to exploit heroes for political gains the way she had when he had been the White Knight. A Warden, unlike a Knight, would be able to refuse her when she next tried to mutilate a young girl's corpse to appease the unappeasable. Besides, the dark-skinned hero was still a high officer of the Grand Alliance. She could not capture him like this without breaking the treaties she had signed.

"Unless you intend to keep me imprisoned until the end of this war," Hanno flatly replied, "there *will* be consequences to this."

It was only his own inclination to end this peacefully that would keep her from being scraped raw for this, and he was steadily losing it.

"No," she bluntly said, "there won't be."

He stared at her in disbelief. Did she think herself invincible because Below's stories had been silenced?

"You both need me too badly to pick that fight," the Warden said. "See, if you actually do go after me it's not going to be kept quiet. It's going to come out, word's going to spread. And what exactly do you think's going to happen when people learn you're coming after me to steal an artefact that was already in my possession?"

Hanno's blood ran cold as he genuinely considered it. Even if he was the Warden by then, the amount of damage that conflict would cause just as they prepared to march on Keter...

"You would kill this entire continent for your pride?" he challenged.

"See, now we get to it," Catherine Foundling mused. "You're holding Calernia hostage, pretending you can't bend but I should. She does the same, in her own way. And that's the part that actually pisses me off, you know? That you're both taking charity from me, depending on my goodwill, and then I for some godforsaken reason I have to pretend one of you is my *equal*."

There was a cold, burning indignation in that dark eye that Hanno knew was too blistering to be feigned.

"You have not earned it," Catherine Foundling said, smiling thin and sharp, "and this offends me."

A blade-like smile, he thought. He'd seen it before on another face and liked it no better then.

"This is not," Hanno slowly said, "posturing, is it?"

He'd seen from the start that Catherine was playing a game, that she was enforcing rules and preventing deaths. He had thought it to mean that she was not serious, but it was beginning to sink in that he'd been wrong.

It might be a game she was playing, but the Warden was deadly serious.

"I've played nice with you fine folk," Catherine nonchalantly said. "But it looks like you need the same wake up call Tariq did."

Night surged, swelled, the shapes of thousands of crows flapping their wings filling every surface. Cruel beaks and talons reached out for flesh to slice.

"My help is a *decision*," the Warden of the East said. "It is not a right or a given. And the moment you begin to delude yourself otherwise, I will bury you in a shallow fucking grave."

Hanno breathed out, sought his calm. The situation had deteriorated far beyond what he'd thought possible, but all was not lost. She was still talking and he was still alive. This was not yet over.

"Yet you have not," he said. "So this is still a negotiation."

Her haze hardened, and immediately he knew he had made a mistake.

"You're not learning the lesson, Hanno," Catherine Foundling mildly said. "See, for one you still think that you got me to monologue. That I was trying to hide any of this."

The Book of Some Things screamed, pinpricks of Night beginning to slither through cracks in the globe. Tendrils of darkness were stretching out towards the artefact, hungry and foul. It was like hearing a child be beaten, a painting get ripped: ugly and impossible to take back.

"I didn't need to bargain to eat the Book," the one-eyed priestess said. "Or to shackle you. The difference between you and I, Hanno of Arwad, is that I'm the Warden of the East."

She raised a hand, strands of Night coalescing around it as if they were eager.

"I murdered my own father for that Name," the Warden said. "I've mutilated people I love, scarred my own flesh. That's what I

wield every time I call on Night, that's the foundation of my authority."

Darkness pulsed across the room, the breath of some gargantuan beast.

"And you think that your half-assed claim is equal to that?" she scorned. "What is it you've given up, Hanno, that you've *sacrificed*?"

"You have known tragedies," Hanno acknowledged. "But how many of them were of your own making, Catherine?"

He met her eye.

"You think they are something to *boast* of?"

As pain raised one above others, made them worthy. It was the philosophy of the whip, both the master's and the flagellant's. Nothing more. Being hurt didn't make you better. It just made you hurt.

"They're something," the Warden said. "They're weight. Was it you put up against them, Hanno, what's your foundation?"

She snorted.

"No longer having your hand held by angels," she said. "Giving up the pretense you're above petty mortal disputes. You're standing where everyone else started and calling it a journey."

Hanno's fists clenched. How small his doubts and troubles seemed, made into a single turn of phrase. The globe cracked, groaned.

"You've never believed in anything but your right to climb," Hanno harshly said. "I am not surprised you cannot grasp what faith means or what it costs but talk of it coming from you is like a fish speaking of flight."

She smiled unpleasantly.

"Hey, maybe you're right," the Warden said. "Let's find out. Which is stronger, between Light and Night?"

He stilled. Glimpsing what she was about to say before she said it.

"Light, huh," the Warden said. "I wonder why I can shackle you then."

Her eye burned cold.

"Between my authority and yours, Hanno of Arwad, there is no contest. Talk about faith all you want: it will keep ringing hollow as long as you hang up there."

It fell into place. It was not some fresh power that had let her do this but the mantle she had claimed in the East. His mind spun, considering the enormity of that, but soon he realized she was not so strong as she pretended. There was a reason the Warden had chosen to ride a tower, to draw him into it: here, they were under her roof. A place under her authority, her power. And under that roof the Warden of the East could bend the rules her way, decree that Night would triumph over Light. He found his calm, the quiet place at the heart of him.

It was further away than he remembered, and smaller.

"You embraced your mantle first, that is all it means," Hanno said. "Anything more is wishful paint over your regrets."

"And Gods know I have a great many of those," the Warden of the East said. "An army's worth of ghosts. I have learned my failures, if only because they so lovingly haunt me. You, though?"

She shrugged casually, cuttingly.

"Hells, Hanno," the Warden said, "now you're telling me you want the Warden to guide to heroes the way you did as the White Knight. Can you even hear yourself talking? We've been down this road before."

The one-eyed priestess raised her free hand, wiggling it mockingly.

"How many fingers is the next Mirror Knight going to cost you?" she said.

"Fingers for a life are not a trade I regret," Hanno evenly replied. "Or ever will."

"Then you'll run out of those long before I run out of eyes," the Warden replied. "Of course, it'll all implode far quicker than that. Your house of cards comes down the moment you run into another Red Axe."

His jaw clenched.

"Should I dig her up so she can be cut a third time?" Hanno bit out. "Maybe you can use the spectacle to buy back a deserter prince for a moon's turn. And why stop there? We can dig up a whole graveyard of heroes to shame the full Highest Assembly into showing up the once. They can vote to leave and return to their palaces."

The words were acid on his tongue, acid in his belly, but out they came anyway. He felt no cleaner for it, not relieved in the slightest. Spite lessened both the speaker and listener.

"There it is," the Warden of the East smiled. "They're heroes so they're Good, and that means even their mistakes are always well intended. They shouldn't be strangled with petty mortal laws, just helped out of their messes and allowed to waddle on into the next one. That's the take you bring to the table, isn't it? Or at least what it comes down to, when all the pretty words are stripped off."

"It is one of your worst habits," Hanno evenly replied, "to poison every well you do not own."

He forced himself to be calm, to be steady. To not lean into the anger that burned in his belly.

"You pretend that villains and heroes are the same, that their difference is a simple matter of... abstract philosophy," he said, "but it is not. Even the most vicious of us are trying to end evil, not spread it. You stand instead for rapists, cannibals and callous murderers. Our exceptions are your *rule*. You are indignant that I would free heroes to act because it would harm villains – but villains are only harmed by those actions because they *choose to do evil*."

It was almost a relief to simply say it out loud. To do away with the pretence that there was something laudable about protecting Evil, that it was anything more than a compromise to allow it.

"The second chances you scorn are given, Catherine, because there is a difference between recklessness and malice," Hanno said. "Heroes are not always right, always good. But they all can be, if they're given help."

The claps he received were openly mocking.

"Pretty speech," the Warden of the East said. "Heroes would love it, I'm sure."

A pause.

"But how about everybody else?"

He started in surprise.

"You cann-"

"What do you think the difference is for someone between getting killed by a cannibal murderer or the Saint of Swords?" the one-eyed priestess interrupted. "Nothing, Hanno. They're still dead. And that's the part you refuse to understand. They're sick of my side, and right to be. *But they're sick of your side too.*"

She leaned forward, eye cold.

"Do you think claimants grow on trees, Hanno?" she said. "That Cordelia just *lucked* into having a shot at being the Warden of the West? It's almost like not everyone agrees with that little speech. The fucking arrogance of it, from you who's never ruled so much as a village or had to do anything in a war but fight. The choices don't stay nice and clean when you have to think about more than a hundred people at a time. How very convenient that you've limited how many you need to care about to that number."

He barely heard the latter half of the tirade. She was right, Hanno thought with muted dismay. Not about what she thought, but she was right. In some way, he'd thought that Cordelia Hasenbach had become a claimant because she was the First Prince. Because she was powerful and prominent and one of the titles adorning her crown was 'Warden of the West'. It had been a comfortable thought, one that fit with his opinion of the woman. It was also not how Names worked. That silent realization stilled his tongue. He could not speak until he'd swallowed it, as if it'd filled his throat.

"Ah," the Warden smiled. "There we are. Catching up at last."

"I-" Hanno started, then hesitated.

"You want the Book but you don't have the law on your side," Catherine Foundling said. "You don't have the story either, and if you're going to try to take it anyway what does that leave?"

A hard, cold smile.

"Just violence," the Warden of the East said. "And I'm better at it than you."

She looked him up and down, then shook her head.

"Throw him out of the tower, Archer," she said.

"Cat?" Archer said, sounding surprised.

The Warden of the East met his eyes with her own.

"There's nothing left to beat," Catherine Foundling calmly said. "We're done here."

The words stung more than being tossed out into the grass, though Archer tried her best. Hanno was not surprised.

They had the ring of truth to them.

## Interlude: Occidental III

*"In the Free Cities a general has more to fear from victory than defeat."*

– Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general

Cordelia was not certain which part struck her as more absurd: that house-sized herons dwelled in Arcadia or that the Valiant Champion had apparently *tamed* one.

"Is mine now," the Champion insisted. "Called Wizard."

"Having inspected it, I can tell you that she is in fact female," the Forsworn Healer noted, his faint Atalante accent thickening the drawl. "Perhaps Witch would be more fitting."

*How?* she wondered. *Is part of your Name to have magical bird taming powers? Is it an aspect? You cannot have been in the presence of that heron for more than an hour.* The same heron that must weigh as much as a company of infantry and was nipping at the Levantine's shoulder lovingly.

"Wizard is genderless noun," the Valiant Champion smugly said. "You ignorant."

Cordelia's brow slightly creased before she remembered to smooth it away. The heroine put up a good front, but when she'd spoken the words there had been a glint in her eyes. Sadness, Cordelia decided, or perhaps regret. The Lycaonese princess had long wondered how much of that cheerful brutishness was a mask. Rafaella of Alava often acted like a lout, but it had not made Cordelia forget that she was both one of the longest-serving heroes and a survivor of several disastrous engagements. The Healer narrowed his eyes at the Levantine heroine, visibly irritated, and the princess stepped in before bickering could ensue.

"We need to get moving," Cordelia cut in. "I understand that five is the preferred number for a band of -Named and now we have five heroes gathered here. The tower awaits."

The Kingfisher Prince, the Valiant Champion, the Forsworn Healer, the Painted Knife and the Mirror Knight. It would have to do. Hopefully Cordelia had changed Chosen for Named quickly enough that no one had noticed the stumbling of her tongue. Though her people's terms of Chosen and Damned were not wrong, in her opinion, they were used solely by her countrymen. There was no need to remind foreign heroes that she was a ruling princess of Procer, a fact that already did much to damage her standing among them.

"There is no leader to our band," the Mirror Knight said. "It won't work."

She saw him wince a moment later, both at the implied insult to her rank – which she suspected he cared more about than any other Chosen here – and the blunt dismissal of her opinion. He tacked on a mortified 'Your Highness' afterwards, trying to make up for it. She smiled gently at him to show no offence had been taken, patiently setting aside her irritation, but the damage had already been done. The door to objections had been opened and half of authority was people not knowing they could disagree.

"Agreed," the Forsworn Healer said. "We should gather the others, aim for overwhelming might instead. I saw Apprentice land in an orchard to the southwest, I think."

"I sent Helmgard east to join up with Sidonia and the Astrologer," the Mirror Knight said. "That's three of us, so perhaps we should start there."

"The First Prince is right," the Painted Knife flatly disagreed. "The tower is what matters. The mightiest army in the world will still lose the battle if it does not show up to fight."

Frederic glanced at Cordelia sideways, as if hesitating, then joined his voice when her face remained without expression.

"The Warden of the East laid down a gauntlet through her tower," the Kingfisher Prince agreed. "Refusing to pick it up can only end in our loss."

She would have to take him aside and remind him not to balk this way again, she thought. In this company he did not owe her the deference the Prince of Brus would owe the First Prince of Procer. They were here as Chosen and claimant. On the contrary, it would be to their common disadvantage should he obey her without reason: it would create the appearance of Cordelia trying to merge together the office of First Prince and the Name of Warden of the West. The fair-haired woman knew well that the backlash to even the semblance of this would be harsh and swift.

"So both of you go with her," the Healer suggested. "Meanwhile Christophe and I can head east into the hills. The Vagrant Spear and I can use Light to mark our positions."

The priest from Atalante kept a dark eye on her as he spoke. Watching for her reactions. *He has been trained*, Cordelia decided. The man was said to have earned his Name by swearing away a great fortune and position in the city-state to become a wandering healer, which would explain it. Was he a foe? It was too early to tell.

"Separating would be a mistake," Cordelia said.



A few surprised looks went her way. Not, she thought, at her opinion so much as the fact she was voicing one at all. As if she had no right to. *Named business*, she thought scornfully, *and so only Named should decide it*. In their eyes her claim mattered less than her title as First Prince. She hid the sharp spike of anger.

"Lord Christophe tells me that the Myrmidon and the Blood Sword fell into a lake," she continued. "The only one we have seen is far out west, so they are unlikely to join us in time. I have already sent riders with spare horses to make the attempt, but there is little more to do."

The Painted Knife let out a hum, face considering.

"The Warden could have sent any of us that far out instead," Kallia of Levante said. "If she chose those two, it was for a reason."

"Akatha and Gernot strong but no quick," the Valiant Champion said, petting her giant heron's head. "Swim slows them. Out of battle, like First Prince said."

Though what she'd said was true, Cordelia thought, that had not been the Painted Knife's train of thought. She was asking why Catherine Foundling had chosen these two Named of all those that could be sent furthest. And in her eyes, there was one obvious common thread between the two.

"Both are warriors," Cordelia pointed out. "She might lack fighters of her own and so seek to limit the length our shield wall."

"There are plenty of Bestowed in her service than can match us in a brawl," the Painted Knife skeptically said, then snuck a sideways look at the Mirror Knight. "Most of us anyway."

Cordelia hid a smile. The heroine had not refused her turn of phrase. 'Our shield wall'. One stone after another, she would lay her foundation.

"You've never had to share a front with them, Kallia, wandering around as you have," the Forsworn Healer said. "I'd bet the First Prince is right. If the Warden wants to keep this conflict amicable few of them would be fit for it. I cannot imagine the Red Knight or the Headhunter showing restraint in a duel."

The Painted Knife frowned, then conceded with a sharp nod.

"Her strength must be indirect," Cordelia said. "Mages and tricksters."

Which meant a swift, direct assault might just yield success.

"She will have handpicked those with a fight in mind," Frederic cautioned. "It would be dangerous to assume weakness."

It would be even more dangerous to linger, in her mind. Christophe de Pavanie turned to her, mien serious.

"He's right, Your Highness," the Mirror Knight said. "The tower itself will be hard to breach regardless of defenders. We were baited in last time but now the Warden will truly defend it. I won't claim we need every Chosen we brought, but we should at least find Adanna."

The Blessed Artificer's name, a woman whose mastery of Light would admittedly be a boon when facing Night. It was a fair point.

"Do we know where the Artificer is?" Cordelia asked.

No one had seen her since the drop, but Lady Kallia had a guess.

"One of the mountains beyond the hills collapsed," the Painted Knife said. "I saw it happen from atop the lighthouse. If it wasn't the Mirror Knight responsible, it can only be her."

The man looked embarrassed but did not deny the conclusion.

"Then this will take time," the Forsworn Healer said. "Perhaps we should split up, at least temporarily. I am told you have a knack for finding those in need of aid, Kingfisher Prince?"

His eye was on her again. *A foe, then,* Cordelia thought. He was not simply attempting to read her, he had intentions she was being measured for.

"You might say that," Frederic smiled, brushing back his curls.

The Painted Knife stared at him, manifestly distracted by the sight. Cordelia sympathized. Frederic Goethal had long mastered the art of artless distraction and his disinclination to marry had been the despair of many a highborn lady over the years. Frederic did not elaborate and no one pressed. Cordelia had learned that inquiring in detail about another's aspects was considered exceedingly rude.

"Then you should ride out to find Adanna," the Healer suggested. "Kallia is a tracker of great skill, she can follow you into the hills and find the Vagrant Spear while there."

Cordelia's eyes imperceptibly narrowed. She knew the look in the man's eyes, the too-casual tone. She had dealt with the likes of it before. Frederic was a strong supporter and the Painted Knife had agreed with her on every broad stroke so far. She was also respected among Chosen, a captain of their kind. The Forsworn Healer was trying to send away individuals who shared her

opinions. *This is a trap*, the princess considered. The man had offered himself undertaking that same task earlier in a manner that would be quicker. But it would split him from the group, which he would not want.

So unless he was a fool, this was a trap. Cordelia, unfortunately, could not grasp the nature of said snare. She still knew too little of namelore. *Then I must flush you out*, she thought.

"Your earlier suggestion of using Light as a beacon would be even faster than tracking," Cordelia idly said.

Triumph, not as well hid as he thought. She had read him correctly.

"I might be needed to heal comrades rejoining us," the dark-haired hero said. "But you are right that Light might be quicker, Your Highness. Christophe, can you still flare your plate bright enough to be seen from far away?"

"I can," the Mirror Knight said, almost eager as he looked at her. "It would be my pleasure, Your Highness."

*He was after Christophe from the start*, Cordelia thought. Aiming to send away to the two Proceran heroes present. It was a crude ploy but not senseless. Yet it was too small a prize for the effort he had put into the intrigue, she decided. What patterns of namelore did she know? Numbers, mostly. *He means to send three Chosen in the hills and mountains, where three more await*. Therefore not a 'band of five', which had been her guess. She was yet missing a detail. Cordelia did not know enough about the Chosen, what they could or could not do. She'd read reports and even spoken with some, but always as the First Prince of Procer.

She did not know them, had never been one of them. That was Hanno's strength and her weakness.

"No good to fight tower then," the Valiant Champion bluntly spoke up. "Archer there. Will fuck us up the buttocks if Mirror Knight not there to take arrows."

There was a general air at dismay at the prospect of fighting Indrani the Archer, even from the Levantines. Catherine Foundling's s lieutenant had earned the wary respect of everyone who'd ever seen her fight.

"Perhaps the time would be better spent fetching the Apprentice, then," the Forsworn Healer mildly said. "Kallia, the First Prince and I could ride out to get her. Perhaps even the Bloody Sword and the Myrmidon, as we ought to be close by then. The five of us can serve as another wedge of attack when they return."

So that had been the angle, Cordelia thought. The man did not think they would return from the trip in time and that was the entire point. He was trying to keep her out of the fight, away from the tower. *He is buying time for the Sword of Judgement.* His game was plainly revealed: he was a loyalist, backing his preferred candidate as best he could. The Painted Knife immediately disagreed with the proposal, arguing she was the only one here capable of scaling the tower if need be, and when others jumped in every inch of progress that had been made towards a decision since the conversation began soon collapsed. The Healer did not look displeased by the turn, not that Cordelia had expected him to.

The hero believed that Hanno would win, given long enough, and so preventing a decision from being reached here was already a victory. Unfortunately for the Forsworn Healer, however, she was not a wet-behind-the-ear debutante. She would not fall apart after the first setback, and he had handed her the very key to outplaying him.

"Lady Kallia, you mentioned that a mountain collapsed," Cordelia said, cutting into the chaos. "Is this not true?"

"It is," the Painted Knife frowned.

"Then the Blessed Artificer might be in danger as we speak," the blonde princess seriously said. "For all her power, she is hardly immune to falling rocks. She could be in dire need of a healer."

The Atalantian priest stiffened.

"Is true," the Valiant Champion frowned. "Douka, you need to help."

So that was the Forsworn Healer's name? Interesting. Now for the further nail.

"And therefore is no need to further split our numbers," Cordelia smiled. "Our friend the Healer can signal the Vagrant Spear and the Astrologer as he sets out for the mountains."

"Five Bestowed," the Painted Knife appreciatively said. "A knife held back should we falter. A fine plan."

Cordelia received a respectful nod, which she returned. The Healer's calm soured.

"Arcadia can be dangerous," he said. "Perhaps an escort would be in order when I set out."

"It will not be more dangerous than trying the Black Queen's lair," the Mirror Knight frankly said. "And your going alone weakens us least."

Christophe stiffened.

"Not that I would call you weak," the Knight hastily tacked on. "But this way only one of us goes."

The Champion was still on the fence, Cordelia saw. In need of a nudge to tip her over the edge.

"If you have worries, I can lend you an escort of riders," she kindly offered. "Twenty should be enough, I would think."

It was a done thing after that. The Forsworn Healer glared at her darkly, cornered and unable to extricate himself from the snare he'd laid. His opposition to her did not come from malice. Cordelia reminded herself of that, every time she felt her stomach clench in irritation. Yet while power had swelled in the distance, the great tower of darkness pulsing as Named bickered in circles, Cordelia had not been able to help but think that this was everything she despised about heroes. The disorder, the aimlessness, the *arrogance*. The Forsworn Healer was perfectly willing to risk the darkness to the north getting its way simply because he believed that the Sword of Judgement would win.

Because he would not consider otherwise. Try as she might, Cordelia was seeing no thought given to making a contingency should Hanno of Arwad fail. The priest had simply decided to bet it all on the Sword of Judgement's success. Showing no hesitation in making alone a decision that might affect the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

Catherine Foundling did not play for anything but keeps.

"Let us set out promptly," Cordelia said. "The tower still awaits."

—

The Painted Knife was the first to approach her as they rode. The younger woman was not a comfortable rider, another reminder that though Kallia of Levante was nobility in name in practice she was no such thing. Coming into a Name had raised her to the higher echelons of Levant's hierarchy, but that ascension was largely decorative. All her power was personal.

"You have heard of the gathering that was to take place in Carrouges," the Painted Knife said.

It was not a question.

"I have," Cordelia replied.

She had enough eyes on the heroes and around them that there had been no question of hiding it from her. She did not believe the Sword of Judgement had even tried. Frantically setting aside the

research that might yet save Calernia to prepare for such an assembly had left a bitter taste in her mouth. She'd thought to circumvent the matter entirely by going to Catherine directly, but the Warden of the East had proved reluctant. It had been frustrating, but Cordelia understood the reasons for the tacit refusal. Respected them, even.

But it had left her with only desperate measures to take, until Catherine Foundling's eye-catching entrance had rendered them all unnecessary.

"I was there when the tower parted the sky and the talks ended before they could begin," Kallia of Levante said. "And I will say this: in that swamp lay a dug-up dwarven gate."

Cordelia's breath stilled. Of course, she darkly thought. How had she dared to hope that the soldier would deign to live diplomacy to the trained diplomats? He was Prince White, beloved of people and Chosen, surely that was enough to give him the right to speak for the Grand Alliance and succeed where those who had practised diplomacy their entire lives had been stymied. The Sword of Judgement had not only summoned the heroes to crown himself Warden of the West, he'd been seeking their support to open talks with the Kingdom Under behind the back of the Grand Alliance.

Surprise had turned to cold, deep fury but Cordelia smoothed out her emotions.

"Knowledge most welcome," the fair-haired princess replied. "Though I wonder as to why you brought it to me."

The Painted Knife glanced in front of them, where the Valiant Champion rode to the side of the Mirror Knight.

"The Blood takes no side," Kallia of Levante said. "One of us stands by the Sword of Judgement's side, so balances must be struck even."

Hedging their bets, Cordelia thought, as well as keeping to a tortured line of honour. She thanked the other woman with a nod and the heroine peeled away, leaving the princess to her thoughts. Would Hanno of Arwad truly do this, Cordelia wondered? Risk everything and everyone so recklessly? She was not unaware that her growing dislike for the man was tainting her opinion, but even careful consideration led to the same conclusion: he would.

He would do it because it was right, Cordelia thought. Because he was following his principles. Because in the eyes of so many heroes, doing right was enough to give you the right. And that was the conceit that Cordelia could not stomach, because even the highest of Procer did not dare claim so high a perch. She came from a land where even royalty could be put on trial. Not easily

and often not as fairly as it should be, but even the mightiest of princes could be put to trial. But who was it that called the Chosen to account, when they abused the powers the Gods had granted them?

Nobody.

When the second Levantine of their party came to ride by her side, Cordelia was not surprised. Rafaela of Alava was very much a partisan of the Sword of Judgement, one of his oldest comrades. It had only been a matter of time until one of those approached her on his behalf. Better her than the Witch of the Woods, whose importance to the defences of Salia made complicated to deal with.

"First Prince."

"Valiant Champion."

The heroine's long braid swung back and forth across her back, freed by the snarling badger helmet she held in her hands.

"I be blunt," the Champion said. "Will not work. You can-not be Warden of the West."

"A bold claim to make to a claimant," Cordelia mildly replied.

"You sneaky," the Champion said. "And clever, like fox. But you have no steel. So you can-not be Warden of the West."

"There is more to victory than swords," she evenly replied.

"Maybe," the Valiant Champion said, then flicked a look at the tower in the distance. "But Warden of the East is clever *and* has sword. Against her, you lose."

"Even if that were true," Cordelia said, "what makes your man better?"

"Hanno can learn sneaky," the Champion said. "You cannot learn sword. Not perfect man, but best there is. Peregrine would have been better."

"I disagree," Cordelia replied, tone cooling even further.

"Ashen Gods agree, is what matters," Rafaela shrugged. "Can't fight the sea, is why we make boats."

The princess's eyes narrowed. That was a Levantine proverb paraphrased: 'if you cannot fight the sea, build a boat'. It meant that one should make accommodations with the inevitable, make the best of what could not be changed.

"You want me to strike a deal with him," she said. "To exact terms in exchange for withdrawing my claim."

The other woman sharply nodded.

"No one is happy, everyone gets something," the Valiant Champion said. "Is politics."

"And if I were disciplined from striking such a bargain?" Cordelia calmly asked

"Should," the Champion said. "Mistake not to. Even if you clever way to Warden, won't work. Some refuse to obey after."

The dark-haired heroine eyed her frankly.

"I may be one," Rafaella of Alava told her. "So make your boat, First Prince."

Neither of them bothered with the pretence of a courteous goodbye. It was as if the world was hammering the nails in one after another, Cordelia thought. First the arrogance, and now the other side of the coin: heroes did not believe in rules. Even villains bent easier to law! After all, for most it had been a given all their lives that should they behave heinously there would be someone punishing them: the heroes. The servants of the Hellgods were often cruel and almost always selfish, but they were also governable. They were used to be governed, however indirectly, used to there being an authority above them – even if that authority was simple force.

Heroes were not. They followed their belief to the end, bolstered by the accolades that were Light and Name. Why should they doubt, when the Gods Above themselves gave them what they saw as a tacit nod of approval?

*But you are not better,* Cordelia sharply thought. *Not really. You make mistakes too.* She ought to know, having spent the last few years cleaning them up. It had been when Prince Gaspard's plot came out that she saw the heart of the trouble. The Prince of Cleves had tried to make the Mirror Knight into his puppet son-in-law, to use the hero's fame and power as fuel for his ambitions. In the wake of the affair being outed Cordelia had mended the break as best she could, and still the Firstborn had marched out of Cleves. Gaspard was forced to abdicate the moment she had the influence to see it done, but there lay the problem: while she handled the prince, the Mirror Knight was neither taught nor punished.

He was just... left to keep on going as he would.

The White Knight was meant to lead the heroes, had claimed that duty before Gods and men when he became a high officer of the



Grand Alliance, but he had never taken them in hand. Cordelia could punish princes who schemed with heroes all she wished, had done so several times, but what was the point when no one punished the heroes who schemed with earthly powers? Again and again, a hundred small justices – proud, personal principles – had eaten away at the laws of the Grand Alliance from the inside as the White Knight simply watched.

The Red Axe had tried to unravel the Truce and Terms, to murder a prince of the blood, and some of the Chosen had actually *agreed* with her actions. The Mirror Knight had – him again! – mutilated a high officer of the Grand Alliance and was then let off with a slap on the wrist. The Peregrine had murdered an entire village of Procerans in his hunt of the Black Knight, and he had been influential enough that Cordelia had never been able to so much as chide him for it. Hanging the old monster, as he deserved to be, would have started a war. And the Saint of Swords, the first madwoman of the lot, had been the worst of them.

She'd been willing for all of Procer to burn, if the pyre might take the Dead King with it.

Cordelia had bled herself dry trying to keep the wall that stood behind Calernia and annihilation from breaking while the White Knight let his charges rip out stones without saying a word. Heroes hid behind their Light by claiming that holy duty set them apart from mortal laws and then, after rubbing elbows with those same mundane powers to disastrous effect, retreated behind that protection when consequences came knocking. One law for them, one for everyone else. And Hanno of Arwad did not believe that heroes could be called to account by anyone but the Gods, he had proven that much through his actions,

Cordelia had had enough. If no one else discharged the duty properly, then she would. And if the likes of the Forsworn Healer and the Valiant Champion insisted on getting in her way, she would sweep them aside. There was no compromise to be had with duty. Emerging from the boiling thoughts with her mind clear, sharpened, Cordelia's gaze found the tower had neared. They were close, nearly there.

"And now," the blue-eyed princess murmured, "violence."

They slowed when standing in the tower's shade, below the dark monolith whose darkness stood out even in the dark of night.

Cordelia knew better than to try to direct a fight between Named. Not yet. Instead it was Frederic who took the lead, sending the Painted Knife up the walls and assaulting the bottom of the tower. Even steel-barded wood could not long resist the strength of the Mirror Knight, and so after a shattering blow the three Chosen stepped into the dark. Cordelia would follow but not immediately. In the thick of the fight she would only be a

hindrance, a potential hostage. She would be of use when it came to talking, not while the blades were out. Until then she would wait out in the plains, the moon high above and the roiling shadows all around her. It was a beautiful night, she thought, for such a dangerous one.

The noise of combat came from the inside, but curses and shouts and the sound of steel clashing, but as time passed it came from further and further away. The tower swallowed noise just as it swallowed light, Cordelia thought. The very nature of Night was taking, and more of that dark power had been gathered here than the princess had ever seen before. It hinted at the scope of the Warden of the East's ambitions. *It has to be the Book of Some Things*, she thought. It was the threat guaranteed to get the two claimants to the wardenship of the West knocking at her door and no small prize should it be taken, devoured? She was not sure of the method that would be employed, but the Black Queen of Callow was infamous for her skill at stealing the power of others and making it her own. Even her fearsome armies had first been taken from the Legions of Terror.

"Yet you do not believe in forcing choices where you can lose," Cordelia murmured, looking at the tower. "So what is that you gain here, should you not eat the Book?"

She would have a reason for beginning all this. Catherine was reckless, but it was a calculated sort of recklessness: leashed to her purposes, not allowed to run loose. Cordelia had first thought this was an exercise to make herself and the Sword of Judgement allies of fortune, but the longer she stood here the more she doubted it. *Something* was coming to an end tonight, she could feel it in her bones. Lost in her thoughts as she was, she did not notice it at first. The movement. And even when the tall grass moved, she thought it to be the wind.

It was only when the first rider fell and his horse panicked that Cordelia realized they were under attack. The riders spread out as swords were bared, two of her retinue immediately covering her sides with shields, but there was nothing around for them to fight. Only strands of shadow, of Night, rearing up from the grass to take men by their limbs and tie them to the ground. They could not win.

"Inside," Cordelia yelled out. "Send word that the Warden is attacking from the back."

Two riders tried, but the shadows caught them. Tripped the horses and bound the men. One by one her escort was disappearing into the grass, as if swallowed whole by coffins of green.

"Your Highness," her captain said with forced calm, "we need to leave. *Now*."

He was right. Fleeing was better than allowing herself to be taken prisoner. She nodded her agreement and pulled at her reins. East, they must head east. There were allies there. A heartbeat later a tendril of Night covered the captain's mouth, silencing the scream as he was ripped off his horse. There were so few of them left, Cordelia saw, only a handful.

"Retreat," the First Prince shouted. "East, get the other Chos-"  
Darkness.

## **Interlude: Occidental IV**

*"It is not enough to win. If you do not destroy the very foundation on which your enemy stood, all you have done is change the face of the man who will kill you."*

– Dread Emperor Benevolent

Cordelia woke up looking at the moon.

The sky spread out above her, a river of darkness with glistening jewels for stars and brightest among them the crown jewel of night. *The midnight eye*, she thought. She was not manacled, the fair-haired princess found, but she was chained. Someone had set her down on a throne of stone from which twisting chords of Night slithered out, forming into shackles around her hands and feet. Trying to rise up, Cordelia found her legs wobbly and half-fell back into the seat. She groaned as she bruised the back of her knees against the stone, forcing aside the pain to look around. She must be atop the tower, she thought. The view could come from nowhere else.

And there was only one person who could have brought her here.

"I do not believe," Cordelia said, "that you would abduct me only to then ignore my presence. Shall we dispense with the theatrics, Catherine?"

A long moment passed and she wondered if she had not just made a fool of herself, but from behind her came the sound of a match being struck. Though she felt the urge to twist around on the seat and look back, Cordelia forced herself not to. Appearances mattered even more when you were at a disadvantage. Instead the acrid smell of wakeleaf drifted to her, lazily carried by the breeze, and she heard that familiar limp drag itself across the stone. A soft step and then the sharp rap of the staff on stone, all a fabricated display of weakness. The Warden of the East could still move as swiftly and gracefully as a cat when she needed to.

Catherine Foundling limped into sight from her left, moonlight lapping at her back like the tide at the shore. Even the jarring colours of the Mantle of Woe were drowned in strands of Night, as if she wore a cloak woven from it, and only the cherry-red burn of the pipe allowed Cordelia to see anything at all under the dark of the hood. One piercing brown eye set in a face carved by hatchet, all sharp angles and severity. It was only those ever-expressive lips that broke from the blade edges: always smiling and smirking, grinning and baring teeth.

The Warden drew back the pipe to blow a long stream of smoke, veiling her face in darkness for a moment, and Cordelia was left without a window to gaze through. When the red burn returned, it was to an amused little quirk of the lips. Like she knew a joke no one else did.

"Hanno would have seen the trap coming," the Warden of the East lightly said. "You do know that, right?"

Cordelia let the barb pass through her. This was a negotiation, diplomacy. Allowing the woman on the other side of the table to irritate her was handing her further advantage when she already had many.

"It is decent manners to offer refreshments when entertaining a guest," Cordelia calmly replied. "I believe a tart red is the traditional kind vintage for stargazing. A bottle from lakeside Aequitan if you have one."

Unlike the rest of the principality the large cities near the coast had never truly become Arlesite even after the Aquitanii were conquered, so the ancient tart grapes were still used in the vineyards. Aequitan reds from the south were unpleasantly sweet, Cordelia had found, best drunk with small game or not at all.

"How fortunate, then, that you are not a guest," the Warden drawled. "If you insist on wine, Hasenbach, there should be a bottle by the seat. You can pour for yourself."

Cordelia did grope around, finding to her relief that her legs were steadying, and hid her dismay when she saw that it was half-empty bottle of Vale summer wine that rested on a low table. She could have used a drink that did not taste like it had been mixed with cider to settle her nerves. The Queen of Callow's hopelessly provincial taste in wine had been speculated by some to be a clever way to display Callowan pride, given the famously poor reputation of those vintages, but Cordelia had sadly learned better. She took a deep drink of the glass she'd poured, much more than was polite.

Awful.

"You'll be able to stand before long, if that's what you were trying to do," Catherine idly said. "The binding was just a little rougher than I meant it to be."

She had little practice with bindings, Cordelia thought, because she so rarely took prisoners. Had the sideways reminder been on purpose?

"Duly noted," she replied. "As we have now both found a vice to nurse, given the circumstances I believe it would be forgivable to do way with the usual courtesies."

The face disappeared into the dark, a cloud of smoke flowing out.

"Indeed?" the Warden amusedly said.

"Indeed," Cordelia confirmed. "I imagine that your plans for the Book of Some Things are nearing their end, which invites urgency in our talks."

For a moment she thought she saw the other woman wince at the mention of the artefact, but it might have been a trick of the light. A single fleck of red cast just as many shadows as it did their opposite.

"We'll be ending this soon," Catherine Foundling casually agreed. "The attack on the tower is going south in a hurry and-"

She suddenly paused, then sighed and snapped her fingers. There was a flare of Night and a curse from someone else's mouth. Cordelia rose to her feet just in time to see a shape being tossed over the edge of the tower. The one-eyed queen limped there, then cast an irritated look downwards.

"I can see *in the dark*, Kallia," the Warden peevishly called out, "and I've traded the one eye for a hundred. Try that again when you're actually invisible, not just quiet."

There was a loud thump and a snap, then a hoarse shout.

"Crows," Catherine Foundling muttered, shaking her head. "If she doesn't stay down with the second leg broken I'm going to need to have a talk with that girl. There's a difference between determined and goddamn stubborn."

Cordelia glanced down at her glass, allowed herself a grimace and then polished off a third in a single swallow. It seemed that there would be no rescuers coming to free her, which was unfortunate. Buying time for them to come had been in the back of her mind, but she would have to negotiate without that card up her sleeve. Adjusting her angle accordingly, the blonde princess discarded any thought of a bargain from even relative strength. The only way she would pass through this victorious was by

discovering what it was that Catherine Foundling truly wanted and how it could be leveraged into a compromise.

Cordelia took a few steps around the stone seat, finding that her Night chains followed without restraining her, and laid her elbows against the back of the throne. She felt Catherine's eye back on her even as the wink of red was taken away, replaced by a plume of smoke that drifted up to the cloudless sky.

"I was given to understand that the Book of Some Things is a manifestation of Good stories," Cordelia calmly said. "Though I do not believe there is precedent for such an act, one might assume that destroying such an artefact would have dire consequences."

The Warden of the East smiled.

"Assume," she repeated. "That's been a problem lately hasn't it, Cordelia? How often you're forced to *assume*."

The wrong approach, the princess acknowledged without missing a beat. That had not been a personal attack made because the one-eyed queen was feeling defensive, it had been a barb made out of derision. *I misread signs and was mocked for it.* She did not mind. That, too, was actionable information. The Book was not the keystone then, either destroying or ingesting it. There was another motive underlying all this chaos. What? If she found this, she found the key to it all.

"Then disabuse me, Catherine, by all means," she pleasantly said. "If I have made an error let us resolve it."

Even from a change of subject she should be able to glean a hint. The Warden's smiled turned sharp and Cordelia's heart sunk. She had mistepped again. *I will lose every time until I learn what game it is we are playing,* she darkly thought.

"Have you ever wondered why it is that you're held in high esteem by so many rulers," Catherine Foundling nonchalantly said, "but when heroes look at you, deep down most of them believe you're a failure?"

Cordelia straightened, elbows leaving the back of the throne as she set down her cup on it.

"Only a handful of Named alive have ever ruled," she replied. "Or even held high office. Few understand what those responsibilities entail or what the limitations of a crown are."

Heroes, in particular, grew strong through uncompromising conviction. It encouraged the belief that simple solutions would suffice no matter the situation, which was wildly untrue.

Strength grew into ever more complicated a word the higher you came to stand.

"That's true," the Warden amiably replied. "It's not what most of them are built for, even if they don't want to admit it. But then they're hardly alone in that, since you're only looking at the half of the truth that you like."

An idle step forward, even as Cordelia warily took her cup in hand.

"They see you as a failure," the Warden of the East said, "because you *did* fail."

The tall princess's eyes narrowed imperceptibly, the first genuine stirring of anger of this conversation rearing up its ugly head until she smoothed it away.

"That's the gap in perspective, Cordelia, that you're not seeing," the one-eyed queen continued. "A lady, a king, they look at what you did and applaud. It was an impossible task but you moved mountains and held up the sky, compliments galore. But heroes?"

The Damned shrugged.

"What they see is that Cordelia Hasenbach took up an impossible task and then she failed," the Warden said, "when victory against impossible odds is the very foundation of what a hero *is*."

It was a moment of cold, cutting clarity that followed the words. The pieces fit, suddenly and cruelly. The sneers she had found buried deep in the gaze of so many Chosen, that simple marrow-deep disbelief that she had not been able to fix everything and prevent the inevitable. The ugly assumption not so much as whispered but ever present that somehow, she had chosen Procer should fall.

Impossible was not a word any of them genuinely believed in.

"Bearing a Name would not have made keeping the Principate together easier," Cordelia evenly said. "Given the Truce and Terms, it would have instead significantly complicated my efforts."

She would have been both above and under the White Knight in authority, the boundaries of jurisdiction so blurred as to be useless. Cordelia entertained the thought, briefly, but could only see a disaster in the making.

"And that would matter if Procer was your wheelhouse," Catherine said, rapping her staff against the side of the throne.

The sound almost made her flinch. It was like rattling the cage of a songbird that'd sung out of tune.

"But that's not the duty you're after, is it?" she continued. "You've thrown your hat in the ring to be Warden of the West and that's a very different creature."

And there, Cordelia thought, her line of argument collapsed. She drank from the cup, the too-rich taste filling her palate, and set down it down again on the stone to a neat little note.

"You speak as if not having been Named is a mistake crippling my ambition, that I cannot see the world the way many heroes do," the blue-eyed princess said, "but you are wrong."

She stepped back, chains following so lightly she would have thought them made of feathers if not for the shackles.

"That distance, Catherine, that estrangement? They are the very foundation of my claim," Cordelia said. "I have seen heroes as someone who is not one of them. Witnessed their flaws as only someone who stood outside of their circle can. I can learn namelore, aspects and tricks. All Named do."

All heroes had to learn their nature, the unseen rules of their trade, and not all received the help of a mentor. There was no shame in this, or in her remaining lack. She was a quick study.

"What *cannot* be learned is the understanding of where heroes falter," she told the Warden, meeting the dark eye lit in red. "Where they step beyond the bounds of duty and do more harm than good."

She never would have sought to be Warden of the West without it, so the princess thought it almost absurd to count it a weakness. It was not unlike chastising a bird for having wings.

"Our gap in perspective can and will be bridged," Cordelia plainly told her. "I am not unaware of its costs. But I count it a worthwhile trade for having removed the scales from my eyes."

"You're not listening," Catherine said. "What is it that you've used to push your claim, Cordelia?"

The other woman limped around the throne, leaning her back against it. It was not a restful stance, for all that it was motionless. Cordelia took in the silhouette and could only think of a snake drawing back to strike.

"Armies," the Warden of the East said, enunciating every syllable. "Nobles. Treaties. Everything except people you'd actually be leading. A First Prince in everything but Name."

The princess's lips thinned.



"I do not yet have the sup-"

"*You're not listening,*" Catherine Foundling interrupted in a hiss. "Your claim is a test, and you are *failing* it."

She pushed off cloak of shadows sweeping behind her as she limped forward and Cordelia stepped back.

"You can learn namelore," the Warden said. "Of course you can. Just like he can learn politics. But that's not what a Name is, what a Role is. It's not asking you if you're going to be the right person in five years, it's asking if you are *right now*. Are you?"

Cordelia's eyes hardened. No more steps back. Any fruit grew beyond reach if you raised the branch high enough and kept raising it as soon as the hand neared.

"And were you a perfect fit, Catherine, when you became the Squire?" she challenged. "Was Tariq Isbili, when he became the Grey Pilgrim? I imagine most Named were not, and so it seems to me that the requirements to wardenship rise every time you are at risk of having an equal."

The last touch had been a barb and an investigation both, trying to find what lay behind this tirade, but the princess immediately knew she had not drawn blood. The words washed over the other woman like water over a duck's back.

"That's the thing, Cordelia," the Warden smiled. "You're not my equal. And if that's hard to swallow, you only have yourself to blame: you had months, years to learn namelore on your own."

Cordelia scoffed. Quite the simplification.

"Would you have taught me, Catherine, if I had asked?" she mocked. "Are tutors in the art so easy to find? For some skills time is the only teacher."

It was not as if she had not sought instruction. But namelore was not committed to books, its rules were often obscure and there was only so far reading stories would get Cordelia when she had to deal with heroes from all over Calernia. The few heroes she had been in a position to interrogate were usually new and shallow in learning: even Frederic, perhaps the most seasoned hero on her side, freely admitted that he still had much to learn.

"I'm a villain, there would have been no point," the Warden dismissed. "Which you might have known if you'd asked me. Or if you'd asked any hero but those few you trust – that is, those who already obey you."

"Is having allies a black mark as well, now?" Cordelia said. "An interesting development."

The insinuation that she only trusted through control was particularly rich, coming from the Black Queen. The same woman who had put a knife to the throat of every living being on Calernia to force her enshrinement into the Grand Alliance.

"Not a large one," Catherine scorned. "How many heroes would even back you in an election, First Prince of the Chosen?"

A pregnant pause.

"Ten, fifteen?" she ventured.

The number was roughly accurate, in all likelihood. That the vast majority of these were Proceran was another bitter pill to swallow. It was a weakness, but one she had not had great opportunity to mend. Nearly all Chosen had been on the fronts, far from Salia, and private correspondence with any would justly have been seen by the Highest Assembly as a political act. In a cut of irony, now that the heroes were nearly all in Salia it was even more complicated to approach any of them in private.

The perception that she intended to become Warden through a coup would have... grave consequences, she had grasped.

"Not even a third of the heroes, the very people you're supposed to lead," the Warden of the East said, shaking her head.

"I have not yet made my case to them," Cordelia said, maintaining an even tone. "I would prefer to make it from a stronger position, it is true, but do not mistake timing for inability."

"So confident they'll bend your way after a speech," the Warden chuckled. "How the Hells would you know if that'll work, Cordelia? You've spent years seething about heroes do wrong, but have you actually ever learned what makes them tick? Why do they act the way they do?"

A litany of variations on 'I believed it was right' and 'I followed instinct' had been her answer when she asked, usually.

"The reason is not as important as the result," Cordelia replied instead.

The Warden squinted at her.

"Is that you, Tariq?" she said, grinning nastily. "You're looking good, for a dead man."

The blue-eyed princess kept the twitch of fury the barb had caused away from her face, instead dismissing the rejoinder with a curt gesture.

"That the Grey Pilgrim committed atrocities does not mean his every act and word was wrong," Cordelia said, heat bleeding into her tone. "Only that he committed atrocities and was the kind of man who would."

Calm, she must be calm as the surface of a pond. Catherine thrived in chaos, in the heat of argument. Cordelia would win by keeping her head and grasping why this conversation seemed to have no end point.

"And that is my very point, Warden," she pressed. "Why Tariq Fleetfoot murdered a town full of innocents does not matter. His reasons, his reasoning, they do not matter: only that he did. I do not need to understand his every thought to condemn his actions."

Centering herself, smoothing away the last of the anger, she leaned into the opening.

"Besides, for all your harping on about understanding heroes how many of them agree on anything of note?" Cordelia continued. "You pretend there is some sort of common heroic mindset, but half of them would be at each other's throats without a greater threat looming over them. You reproach me the lack of something that, by and large, does not exist."

That rejoinder bought her a moment to think. *There is no gain for you through this conversation, Cordelia thought. Berating me into dropping my claim is a waste of time when you have half a dozen more direct tools to ensure I lose.* And she'd had the impression that Catherine favoured her claim, besides. Was this a favour, then, an attempt to help Cordelia sharpen her claim? It seemed unlikely. *So what is it that you are attempting to accomplish, Catherine?*

The Warden scoffed.

"Now you're being naïve," Catherine said. "Do you think Hanno is popular with heroes because he's pleasant and good with a sword? He understands what they want, knows what lines they'll fight him over, and navigates that terrain. You, on the other hand?"

Even in the faint red glow, the outline of a sneer could be seen.

"You're a diplomat who never learned the language of the other side of the table. You can get by, sure, but in every conversation how much do you miss?"

Which was not untrue in principle, she thought, but stood an empty objection in practice.

"Hypotheticals," Cordelia calmly replied, circling the throne as she spoke. "Generalities. You stick to those because there are no

true examples to draw in, Catherine. Those that you could, you agreed with my answer. Sometimes even supported it."

The Warden of the East stood behind the throne, the princess before it, and she took back the cup she had left on the stone. The wine was still terrible, but to a parched throat it would be better than nothing.

"You have no practicals, Cordelia," Catherine harshly said. "That's the entire fucking point of what I'm saying: your record with heroes is line after line of nothings. It's not enough to avoid most mistakes. It's not something that lands in your lap if you're the least wrong, you have to *win* it."

She snorted, face disappearing as a stream of smoke spewed out.

"But here's a practical, since you like them so much," the Warden of the East said. "You want to be a leader of heroes, Cordelia, when you know so little of them it would barely fill a thimble and most of them wouldn't trust you to empty a chamber pot."

Trust could be won. It was not an auspicious beginning, she would concede, but beginnings were what you made of them.

"But bad as that is," Catherine continued, "worse is that you never considered making the sacrifices that would have made up for your lack. You know who might have filled you in on namelore, done it eagerly even?"

The smiled turned sharp.

"Hanno of Arwad."

"A rival claimant," Cordelia replied. "This is nonsense."

"Would he be your rival right now, if you'd asked him a year ago?" Catherine retorted. "If you'd reached out after the Arsenal, tried to understand the heroes instead of sitting on your anger and pride?"

Yes, Cordelia's mind whispered, but she was not as certain as she would have liked. She was not without faults. If she were, the last words she had spoken to her uncle would not have been in anger.

"Much can be changed if one shuffles around the past," Cordelia said. "And regrets are easily found. Or are you still proud of your journey to Keter?"

"It was a fruitful disaster," the Warden easily replied.

Unashamed even now.

"You have known many of those," she mildly said. "From the Liesse Rebellion to the bloody end of the Dread Empire. Are you so certain you want to revisit old mistakes?"

She drank from the cup, more to wet her lips and win breathing room than to drink. *You are going to shrug it off again, Cordelia thought. Because this is not a match in your eyes, is it? You do not win by getting the better part of the argument.*

"We'd be here all night, but I'm game," the Warden laughed. "It's not my time that's running out."

The Lycaonese princess stilled in surprise.

"Now now, Cordelia," Catherine chided. "Surely you didn't think keeping me talking would delay the ritual, did you? It can keep going without my hand guiding it."

It made no sense, she angrily thought. If all that Catherine wanted was to consume the Book of Some Things, then there was no need for all this theatre. Cordelia was a valuable hostage, she could have been kept in a cell and left to rot. Instead she was here, circling an empty throne and talking with the person whose time was most valuable in all this affair. The Warden was getting something out of this conversation, otherwise she would not be having it, but Cordelia simply could not tell *what*.

"What happened to the Sword of Judgement when he came to the tower?" Cordelia asked.

"We had a pleasant talk," Catherine easily replied. "And he was tossed back out."

*You cannot beat us through this, Cordelia thought. No, that was untrue. In every way that matters you have already beaten us, so why is it that you are still playing?* Even if some feline impulse of cruelty had taken her, the Warden did not have the time to torment the defeated. It made no sense. Why would she keep playing a game she had already won? The princess drank the last of the wine, washed it down. And as she set it down hastily, almost dropping it, she froze. Remembered another time she had stood across a very dangerous woman and heard a cup topple down.

You kept playing a game, Cordelia thought, when you had not yet won. And simply because she was defeated, because Hanno of Arwad was defeated, did not mean Catherine Foundling had won. She found the Warden of the East's dark eye, glimmering red. *It was never us you were playing against, was it?* Her pulse thrummed, she straightened her back. She had found the thread, now she only needed to follow it down to the end.

"And how many sins did you hang around dear Hanno's neck?" Cordelia too lightly asked.

"Enough," she laughed. "You know, I actually think that all this enmity between you two goes back to a single moment."

"Do you now?"

The Warden breathed in deep, face veiled by the dark, and answered through a wreath of smoke.

"The first time you saw each other," Catherine said. "When he entered that Chamber, spun that coin and you caught it. You each thought you understood the other, for a moment. And you've paid the price for that ever since."

She ran a hand atop the back of the throne, as if amused.

"He thought he was looking at someone who was Good enough to be heroine," the Warden told her, "and so your every compromise since has been a disappointment. You, on the other hand?"

"By all means," Cordelia pleasantly smiled, "do deign to inform me of what I believe."

The one-eyed queen wagged a finger at her.

"You, Cordelia, saw that he respected your stepping in," the Warden of the East said. "And you thought that meant he respected law, respected how Procer is run. That made him the good hero, the trustworthy one."

Cordelia's belly clenched, for that had the faintest ring of truth to it.

"Only he didn't actually care for either of those things," Catherine said. "He accepted it as a courtesy, from Named to Named. Because the way you saw it, you might not have the power but you have the conviction – and that's the part that matters, anyway."

"You revisit the past so often one might believe you would rather live there," Cordelia sharply replied.

"It's an interesting night, that's all," the one-eyed queen said, elbow against the throne and chin on her hand. "Plenty there to ponder about. Like the way that you turned down a Name that night, Cordelia."

"It would not have made anything better," the princess replied, and meant every word.

"I don't entirely disagree," Catherine said. "It was a wise decision in some ways, but it also speaks to the one sin I'll hang around your neck that outweighs all of Hanno's: you don't actually *want* to be Named."

A sliver of incredulous laughter escaped her lips before she could smother it.

"Then pray tell, what exactly has all this been in the service of?" Cordelia said, gesturing at the night around them.

"Not wanting it," the Warden smiled. "You're doing it because you think it's your responsibility, your duty, but fight all you like under that flaking coat of paint I still see the same woman that was on the floor of the Highest Assembly that night."

Cordelia took a step back, jaw clenching.

"The one who snatched Judgement's verdict out of the air and swore mortal laws for mortal men."

"It is not that simple," she bit out.

"It never is," the Warden said. "And I think you're right about a lot of things, Cordelia. Heroes *should* have someone calling them to account. But it's not enough to be right. To be clever or to be wise. You also have to win it. Because know who else believes that just being right is enough?

She saw the end of that sentence before it came, but that did nothing to dull the sting.

"The same lot you say you're going to make toe the line."

"It is *not the same thing*," Cordelia snarled.

The calm, the calm failed her. How dare she?

"A Name isn't a crown," the Warden of the East said. "You don't just get to have it because it fits your head, Cordelia. And the way I see it, you're not Good enough to be anointed or strong enough to be a tyrant so what's left? *Inheritance?*"

The one-eyed queen leaned closer, as if to whisper a confidence.

"Whose death is going to give you your power this time, Cordelia?" she gently asked. "Even if you spend the Augur down to the last inch, you'll run out of kin long before you stand my equal."

And as the words slid between her ribs like a knife, the cruelty of it opened her eye. It was not an accident, so barbed a phrase. And yet it won nothing. *So the cruelty is the point.* The Warden of the East had come for her certainties, her belief, with methodical brutality. One after another, sparing nothing. *And that is the point. That is what you gain.*

Inflicting that before she was tossed out of the tower to land at Hanno's side in the grass.

"Are you truly so eager," Cordelia Hasenbach quietly said, "to make yourself the villain?"

"It's habit by now," Catherine Foundling confessed, sounding just a touch too grieved to be lying. "But there's power in it, always has been. So ask yourself, Cordelia, before you make yourself into a heroine" what is that you want that power for?"

She rose as she spoke, hand knocking over the cup that had been left there, and as Cordelia saw it tumbling down she felt a whisper.

Darkness.

—

She woke up in the grass, a man standing over her. Cordelia Hasenbach met Hanno of Arwad's eyes and a long moment passed.

"Rough night?" the Sword of Judgement drily asked.

## **Interlude: Occidental V**

*"Adversity tempers, power tests."*

— Helikean saying

It was as if all the world had been cut down to three sights: the night sky above, the pale plains below and the tall tower bridging them. The dark was quiet, and there was not another soul to be found for miles around them.

"We are returned to Creation," Hanno said, offering his hand to the prone princess.

Cordelia Hasenbach looked at it as it were a snake, then something like contempt flickered across her face. Jaw squared, she took the hand and he helped her rise from the grass. Her legs were unsteady but the First Prince was a stubborn woman: she toughed it out until her stance firmed.

"Do you know how much time has passed?" the princess asked.

"Since you were taken? I can only guess," he replied. "But between my arrival here and yours, barely time enough for a kettle of water to boil. Arcadia makes sport of any who would measure its time."

Had it been hours for those in the realm of the fae, moments? More the former than the latter, he guessed, but guesses were all he had to give. Hanno waited as Hasenbach gathered her bearings, taking in the utter emptiness of the plain around them before her



gaze moved to the tower. The gate that Christophe had smashed open still lay sagging on its hinges, almost an invitation.

"I suspect," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "that passing the threshold unprepared would be a costly mistake."

"It ends soon," Hanno quietly agreed. "Have your instincts grown enough to feel it?"

Cool blue eyes considered him. No answer came.

"It is in the air," Hanno told her. "The roads grow short for the lack of ground left to tread."

It was like a shortness of breath or unease in the limbs. The sensation that the story would soon reach its conclusion and that he was not ready. Here and now, the two of them alone under the sky, was the last chance to turn it around.

"Like an edge," the princess finally said. "It feels like the moment before defeat, when the wheels and cogs are already moving but just before they snap into place."

Hanno nodded. It was impressive, he thought, that even as a claimant she would have so sharp an impression. But then the First Prince had always been an impressive woman, hadn't she? That had never been the trouble with her.

"The threshold is the point of no return," the dark-skinned man pensively said. "But we have time before that, all the room that can be found in the boundary between Arcadia and Creation."

That was what the world whispered to him, the current his crippled hand could almost feel. Time was undefined now, made... malleable by the gap between the two realms. But the story would lock into place the moment they crossed the threshold, leaving only the closure.

"Of course we do," the First Prince said, sounding disgusted. "How many steps ahead did she plan this?"

Hanno's lips thinned.

"Too many," he said.

Blues eyes left the tower, returning to him.

"Then this conversation," Cordelia Hasenbach calmly said, "is what determines victory and defeat."

Victory and defeat, huh. Loaded words, on a night like this one: whose meaning for them was to be taken as gospel? His, the First Prince's, Catherine's? Or maybe that was the point of it all, he

thought. Choosing whose lines in the sand determined the nature of the game.

"I am beginning to believe," Hanno said, "that thinking in those terms is the first mistake. In a fight, someone must lose."

"And what would you call this instead?" the First Prince of Procer said, gesturing around them.

Grass painted pale by moonlight, the depthless dark above and in between the tower that belonged to neither. Like stairs joining the heavens and the dirt. *Going up or going down?* Not something you could know, Hanno thought, before your foot first touched the stone.

"A journey, perhaps," the Sword of Judgement finally replied.

Something with a beginning and an end, but not a battle. Not without struggle, for so few things were, but not something *defined* by struggle.

"A journey," Cordelia Hasenbach repeated, tone musing.

The princess's hand rose, fingers extended, as below them both the grass shivered from the breeze. Like she was trying to catch the wind.

"Maybe," the fair-haired woman said. "But I am not so certain you and I are on the same one, Hanno of Arwad."

A reply came to mind silver-quick, from the old law-riddles of Arishot's Ruminations. *Can strangers ever be on the same journey?* He'd loved those scrolls as a young court scribe in Arwad, the way they forced you to think. Arishot had not written to make laws but instead lawmakers, asking questions that bent one's understanding until flaws were revealed. That riddle warned against common blame, Hanno had thought, against faulting a rower and a captain the same way for a crime. *But which of us is the rower, Cordelia Hasenbach, and the captain?*

"I had thought," Hanno admitted, "that this would end by the ascription of fault."

The First Prince studied him, gaze composed.

"But no longer?"

Hanno snorted, suddenly tired in a way that had nothing to do with the hour.

"What does it matter," he said, "if the pool one of us drowns in is a few feet deeper than the other's?"

Hasenbach looked away as if burned by the sight of him.

"She took you to task as well," the First Prince said.

"With method and great enthusiasm," Hanno replied.

Some of that he knew she must have sat on for years. Too much of that had felt like a valve being opened, a sac of venom being drained.

"I as well," the First Prince said, then hesitated.

Hanno patiently waited.

"She is convincing, I know," the princess said. "That does not mean she is right."

"I spent most of my time on the grass," he admitted, "finishing the argument in my mind. Speaking the retorts I could not place, that escaped me in the moment."

He could see now, looking back, that she had angered him on purpose. He would have spoken better calm, seen more clearly. He could have pointed it out it was absurd to pretend that the Saint or the Pilgrim to killing innocents in the pursuit of ending an evil was equivalent to a villain simply killing for evil. That her sacrifices, the weight they had given her Name, did not make her *worthy*. Just strong. That Hanno himself had made mistakes, but that if those disqualified him from wardenship then her own would make her the last woman allowed anywhere her title.

Like a fencing match, he had played it again and again in his mind. Every time swatting away more of her points, scoring more of his own. But one had never budged no matter what he cast against it.

"Did it change anything?" Hasenbach asked.

He breathed out slowly.

"Nothing that matters," he admitted.

That was the difference between a fencing match and a duel, when it came down to it. One was won on points, the other ended when the opponent was killed. A thousand small cuts mattered nothing in the face of that single blow going through the heart. *Do you think claimants grow on trees, Hanno?* And no matter how much he turned around the words in his palm, looking for the fault, he had found none. Cool blue eyes were studying him again, looking for something in the cast of his face.

"What is it that she said that shook you so?" the First Prince asked.

*An unpleasant truth, the dark-skinned hero thought. That I never stopped to consider that you might be right and I might be wrong.*

*That your claim could be the equal to mine instead of an obstacle to overcome.*

"That I should have asked you a question years ago," Hanno replied. "W-

—

"-hat is it that you want, Cordelia Hasenbach?"

His tone was as serious as it was earnest, and still Cordelia almost laughed. She looked away so he might not notice, eyes finding the vast stretch of the plains. The sea of grass where strands of shadow and light interwove, under the starlit ink of the endless sky above them. Two seeming eternities pressing down on the stark silhouette of the tower, a stubborn nail refusing to be hammered in. But nothing could fight forever, Cordelia knew. Instead you were used up grain by grain until not a speck was left, the defeat so quiet and creeping you did not know of it before it embraced you.

What did she want?

For her uncle to be alive, her family with him. That the realm she had spent half her life healing had not become a wasteland ruin, that she could have kept everyone alive. That she had won more and lost less, that she had been the kind of woman who could have saved Procer instead of being the custodian of its death throes. That Calernia might know one long and lasting summer, a golden peace and time of plenty. That she was not carrying with her so many ugly choices, so many bitter compromises. And maybe, beneath it all, that she was still the same woman than before all the sacrifices she had made.

But that was looking back, and not even the Gods could return the arrow of time to the quiver. So instead Cordelia looked forward and sought her answer, shaving away the dross one cut at a time until there was only the bone of it left. It was even simpler than she had thought.

"I want my successor to be able to hang the Peregrine," the princess said, then frowned.

That was not quite it. The arrow missed by a thumb.

"No, I speak untrue."

She breathed out, groping at the truth, and finally the words came to her,

"I want a world where it is a given the Peregrine will hang," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "Where there is no doubt that someone, *anyone*, who murders an entire town of innocents will die for it.

That there will be no excuse, no protection, no talk of a Choir giving absolution or a greater good hiding behind the mountain of corpses."

Catherine had talked about so many heroes, about that night in the Chamber of Assembly and the crossroads of the Arsenal, but these were not the source from which it all flowed. It was that brutal campaign through the heartlands, the Black Knight burning granaries and villages to kill thousands in starvation. It was the Grey Pilgrim condemning hundreds of innocents to a painful death to catch his foe, only to then *keep him alive*. It had been the seed of the realization that rules, laws, did not really apply to them. That only Named were entitled to dole out justice to Named, that whatever the first colour of the cloak it always ended up red.

The Sword of Judgement took a step back, turning to face her instead of standing side by side, and Cordelia knew it had begun.

"Princes can destroy towns as well," the Sword of Judgement said, tone even. "Many have. How many were brought to justice by law?"

*I fought the Great War as girl*, Cordelia thought. *Do you truly think you have anything at all to teach me about the cruelties of princes?* She had not led her people south as an army because peace somehow did not occur to her. No one raised in the shadow of the Crown and the Plague could be ignorant of the costs of wars, even the most necessary ones.

"How many were brought to justice by heroes?" Cordelia replied.

Before the man could reply she pushed on.

"And I do not mean in the last decade," the blue-eyed princess said. "That is the scale of the immediate, the short precedent. It is not an honest examination of the past. Since the Principate was founded, Hanno of Arwad, how many princes and princesses have deservedly been slain by heroes?"

The brown-eyed man frowned.

"Given a few hours I would be able to give you a precise answer," Hanno said, "but at the moment I cannot."

Cordelia waved that away. She was not trying to ambush him, pretend that lacking an exact number would mean she somehow won the argument.

"Imprecise would be enough," she replied. "Thirty, forty, a hundred?"

He mulled that, eyes going distant for a few heartbeats. The air pulsed faintly with power. *Aspect*, she thought.

"Less than eighty," he finally said. "More than thirty."

And more than she had expected, but not enough to prove her wrong.

"It is a drop in the bucket," Cordelia told him. "There have been thousands of princes since the founding of Procer. Hundreds of them must have been genuinely vile and malicious. Some lived out their lives keeping their throne, I have no doubt, but most of them did not."

A crown was not power absolute and uncontested. Chosen struggled with understanding that when it came to doing Good, but even more when it came to the other side of the coin: no royalty on Calernia would be able to be truly, genuinely evil without consequence even if there were not a single hero in existence. People did not enjoy being ruled by tyrants, even skillful ones. And in the end, a ruler only had power so long as people followed them.

"Some were tried before the Highest Assembly, but I would wager not so many more than heroes have slain," she continued. "It is not a common procedure. Most were removed by their families, by the outrage of the people, by blades or poison."

Hanno shook his head.

"You think of heroes as wandering forces," he said, "but that is true of very few."

Cordelia hid her irritation. That was not at all what they had been discussing.

"For every Pilgrim and Saint there are dozens who became Named seeking to end an injustice and would then not stray far from that mandate," he said. "When finished they will beat the sword back into a ploughshare, return the enchanted ring to the old woman in the woods."

"We stray from the topic," she told him.

"We do not," Hanno calmly replied. "Named are not born out of the Gods waving a hand: those that killed princes were, in all likeliness, brutalized by those same princes. All those means to unseat tyrants you lay out failed for so long and in the face of so great a cruelty that a champion was empowered by Above to end that evil."

The blonde princess paused, genuinely taken aback. It had not occurred to her, truly, that most of the Chosen who had killed Procerans princes would be Procerans as well. In the back of her mind she had always thought of it as a foreign intervention. An

outside force meddling. It was jarring to realize there was no solid reason to believe that was true.

"That such heroes existed at all," Hanno of Arwad continued, "is the mark of the utter failure of the means you defend."

He shook his head.

"You even defend the poison and blades of others while condemning the same tools in a hero's hands," he said. "I will not force on you my belief that becoming a hero means one seeks to do Good, but are you truly going to argue that it makes people less worthy?"

He was not wrong, Cordelia thought, to chide her for having let her gaze shy away from part of the truth. But that did not mean he was right. His blinders were no smaller than her own.

"It does not," the tall princess replied, "but neither does becoming Named take someone beyond laws. It is true, I cannot deny, that you have spoken the truth: the Highest Assembly, the natural means, they fail. Have failed and will fail again."

This was not a revelation for her. Cordelia had spent years convincing, arm-twisting and sometimes outright bribing the Assembly into backing what she believed to be necessary reforms. She had no illusions about the average character of royalty.

"Yet that does not mean decisions about the lives of thousands – sometimes even millions! – should be blindly entrusted to whoever first arbitrarily received power from Above," she retorted. "Good intentions are not *enough*: principle will not make up for a bad tax policy or lopsided trade rights."

Christophe de Pavanie was the man she thought of then. Well-meaning in so many ways, but even now still of narrow perspective and limited in judgement. Paired with power as a Named that could make him rise among the most influential of an empire, it was a recipe for disaster. At best he would be a puppet, at worse a stone around the neck of the people he had taken upon himself to rule.

"Ruling, making the decisions of a ruler, is a skill," Cordelia said. "One that requires a lifetime of training and that very few Chosen have cultivated. A bad decision by a good man will inflict a great deal more suffering than a good decision by a bad man."

A deep breath, steadying herself after the long tirade.

"You are right, the... order of things is imperfect," the princess said. "But that does not mean heroes should be allowed to do as they wish, it means *the order must be fixed*."

"Then fix it," the Sword of Judgement bluntly replied. "Why would any of us oppose the world being bettered?"

"You do not have to oppose it," Cordelia harshly said. "You make it unnecessary by being who you are. Why should there be significant reform to anything at all, when no matter how dire the situation becomes a hero will emerge to save the day?"

"You are arguing in the favour of disaster," Hanno slowly said, incredulous. "That lives should not have been saved?"

"I am arguing," she said, "that heroes have been killing villains and wicked princes since the founding of the Principate and it has fixed nothing. That Chosen excise tumours but do not, cannot heal the sickness that causes them."

And because of that, Cordelia realized in a moment of clarity, she had come to think of them as being part of the trouble. One of the reasons for it. But that was unfair of her. A suspicion born of the souring experiences she had had with Chosen. Blaming them for existing was like blaming a man for not allowing his throat to be cut. About that much the Sword of Judgement was right and she had been wrong.

"And that does not mean they should not exist," Cordelia said, "but it means that so long as Chosen remain the final arbiters of what is good, we cannot *grow*. So long as we leave the decision of what can be allowed and what must be refused in the hands of a handful smiled on by the Gods Above, nothing can change."

And that was what the Liesse Accords were, deep down, the reason that the Lycaonese princess had fought tooth and nail over provisions and sections but never once doubted she would sign it when the negotiations ended. It was a treaty that let mortals dictate rules to Named.

"That world cannot be built so long as laws do not apply to everyone," Cordelia said. "Until it is Calernia, not the Chosen few, that decide what the lines in the sand are."

The dark-haired man had gone still as stone, looking at her as if he had never seen her before.

"They gave us a choice, Hanno of Arwad, the only one that really matters," she quietly said. "Let us *make* it."

—

The irony, Hanno thought, was that in many ways Cordelia Hasenbach was like the very people she distrusted. The ironclad conviction that made up her spine, that he had not grasped was at the heart of all she did, was the very trait that led people to become Named. It was something Creation reacted to, embraced. And



though Hasenbach might despise him for the comparison, as she spoke she had reminded him of no one so much as Tariq Isbili. The Pilgrim's own iron law had been different – the alleviation of suffering, no matter the cost – but looking at the First Prince of Procer he saw in her the same alloy of idealism and brutal pragmatism that had been the Peregrine's signature.

It was an unsettling thought.

"The changes you speak of," Hanno said, "the world would be better off for them."

The princess's lips quirked into a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"But," Cordelia Hasenbach said.

"So long as the first step to them is making heroes obey corrupt authorities," he told her, "there is no chance of them ever coming to pass."

If the foundation of her reform was to make Named bow to the very evil they had risen to defeat, then the ideal was nothing but fool's gold.

"Then let them obey something else," she said. "Rules that crowns had a hand in making but do not belong to the crowns."

He was not a fool, to need every word spelled out to him.

"The Liesse Accords," Hanno said.

Catherine Foundling's dream, the justification for her every atrocity: a muzzle on every atrocity that would come after her. As was so often the way of the Warden of the East, it was the finest of intentions raised atop a mountain of corpses. Hanno believed in their worth, but not that way that Catherine did. The rules would do good for Calernia, curb excesses, but in time they would become a tool for oppression as well. He had no illusions about their permanence, that their ability to better the world would be more than temporary.

"They can accomplish what queens and princesses cannot," the First Prince said. "A set of rules all will abide by. A first step heroes will accept."

"And for that you would become Warden of the West," Hanno thoughtfully said. "To ensure that heroes follow the rules."

The blonde princess looked faintly embarrassed as she nodded.

"I am not unaware of my weaknesses as a claimant," Cordelia said. "I lack knowledge of namelore and have not cultivated many close relationships with heroes."

Hanno hummed.

"But for what you envision the Warden of the West to be, even with those weaknesses you remain the better candidate," he plainly stated.

What she described might be best described as the heroes of Calernia being made into a guild and Cordelia Hasenbach as the head of that guild. It was not a position that would require skill at arms or even a great deal of personal power: her function would be that of an administrator and a diplomat, not a captain. It was also a position that would require her to abdicate all power in Procer, Hanno knew, a sacrifice that would earn her some respect. That she was willing to make that sacrifice did not surprise him as much as it would have an hour ago.

Tariq had never taken the Tattered Throne.

"I was expecting more of an argument from you," the First Prince delicately said.

"I do not agree with your vision," Hanno clarified. "But I do understand that from your perspective pressing your claim is the most sensible answer."

"Yet you disagree," the princess said.

"Not with your intentions," he replied. "There have been enough misunderstandings between us, so I will speak plainly: you do not need to be Warden of the West to achieve this."

It would help her, certainly, but it was not *necessary*. And it was turning the Role to a direction that it did not need to be turned – or should, considering that a guildmistress would not be what Above's champions would need in the wake of the war on Keter. Coolness returned to the blue eyes considering him.

"Indeed?"

"Cardinal will be the seat of the Accords," Hanno said. "And your interest lies in them more than in Named themselves. Taking up a position there as a high officer and a diplomat will place you in a position to shape laws and curb abuses exactly as you wish."

And it would not force her into the position of leader of the heroes, a position she would not enjoy or be particularly skilled at.

"If your worry is lack of influence over Named, then change the Accords to reflect what you believe is necessary," he told her. "I would support this. And as Warden, I would have no difficulty working with you."

She studied him for a long moment, then slowly nodded.

"To my own surprise," the blue-eye princess said, "I find myself believing you would try."

Hanno grimaced.

"But," he echoed.

"The question has been long in coming from my side as well," Cordelia said. "What is it that you want, Hanno of Arwad?"

For all the gravity of the situation, Hanno thought, it felt as if they were children declaiming a play at each other. Taking turns, trading tirades. They were, in a way. Fate was heavy around them, like the air before a storm, and so far in the journey every word mattered. They had run out of room to maneuver. So Hanno considered his answer carefully even though the words came easy, looking for the heart of it. It was too late for grievances to matter, for might-have-beens to be worth bringing up. Instead he looked for the source, the kernel moment of why he had come to stand here.

It was not the Arsenal, he realized to his faint surprise. The disappointments of that fortnight had been long in the coming, more flower than root.

"I want a world," Hanno said, "where you could not have called the Tenth Crusade."

The First Prince flinched. She had reason to. It all went back to that first mistake, didn't it? The moment where the woman in front of him had decided to raise Above's banner without understanding what that decision meant. Where she had put the lives of tens of thousands, of most heroes on the continent, on the line because of terribly mundane reasons. Because Procer had been plagued by disaffected mercenaries, because it had been wary of a resurgent and hostile Callow on its flank. The real reasons for the Tenth Crusade had nothing to do with the Black Queen or the Doom of Liesse: the groundwork for it being called had begun being laid years before.

"I do not believe heroes should rule," Hanno said. "We are forged for a reason, to combat an evil, and that defines what we should be: exceptional power granted to fight an exceptional evil. Come and gone in a few moons, like fireflies."

How many Grey Pilgrims and Saints of Swords were there, really? Sometimes not even a single one in a generation. Hanno believed that a dozen heroes fighting under the Grand Alliance would no longer be Named by now if they had not been drafted into the war against Keter. Their foe and mandate had been clear, stretched

into the present only by the great threat looming over all the living.

"But we no longer live in a world where that is possible," he told her. "Calernia is not the same place it was even a century ago: the kingdoms are more powerful, the cities larger, the borders push ever further into the wilds. It is no longer a place where someone can simply *disappear*."

A century ago, the thought of something like the Truce and Terms would have been laughable. Named were too hard to find, too spread out, and who could even enforce these rules even should they be set down? Now half the younger heroes took them for granted and even the older ones expected that when a great Evil next came to Calernia the same bargain would be struck with villains.

"It is no longer possible to take up the sword and retire into obscurity after having hung it back above the mantle," Hanno said. "Heroes are sought, followed, drawn out by mortal powers. And then they are used for purposes beyond what they were meant for. From that, evil flows."

Like Christophe, whose power and candour had driven the House of Langevin to try to entrap him into some plot. The Mirror Knight should have never so much as spoken to a Langevin: he had come into his Name to protect the Elfin Dames, to face the Wicked Enchantress that would come to destroy them. If not for the Dead King's march, he might never have left the lakeside town of his birth. Hanno had not been offended to learn that the Langevins had sunk hooks into him. Why would he be, when the plain truth of the matter was that unscrupulous souls had taken advantage of the vulnerability a good man had risk to save every living being on Calernia?

And it would keep happening again and again, the corrupt and powerful twisting power meant to do Good, so long as there was no one standing between heroes and earthly crowns. Someone who could free their hands to do Good and steer them away from being used.

"There is some truth in that," the fair-haired princess finally said. "I did not understand what I was unleashing, when I called the Tenth Crusade. I erred and many paid for it."

He slowly nodded. It was only the shallowest layer of what he had said, but it was the beginning of an understanding.

"But your words are not entirely true, are they?" the First Prince said. "Heroes seek crowns as well, 'Prince White'."

The disdain for the title was palpable but Hanno was not offended. How could he be when he agreed?

"Yes," he enthused. "*Exactly*. I should not be holding the authority that I took up."

For the first time since he had met her, he saw the First Prince of Procer visibly taken aback.

"I have had to because Named and kingdoms have become so intertwined as to be indistinguishable," Hanno said, "which is not a state of affairs that should exist."

It was not as if he had wanted to seize the reins. But what other choice had there been, when failing to do so might doom all of Calernia? If Hanno did not become the Warden of the West, did not lead Good's forces against the walls of Keter, he foresaw no victory. The First Prince was fit to rule, but for all that it needed a foundation of authority the Name was not about ruling.

"I have not deluded myself into thinking I am a fit ruler, Cordelia Hasenbach," Hanno told her. "I have to bear a crown, let it be a firefly's crown: gone in a few moons, when the darkness abates. And after the need has passed—"

"You would set it down and stand as Warden of the West," the First Prince calmly said. "Spending your days ensuring that heroes stay true to their purpose by keeping them apart from earthly powers, stand as the intercessor between them."

"It is not that the world is corrupt and heroes without fault," he said. "Above's blessing does not make Named more than men, beyond pettiness or cruelty. But that power comes in recognition of a need to do Good, to make the world a little better."

And maybe the princess was right and one day the world would have no need for heroes, but that day had not come. Perhaps Calernia had changed, but heroes could as well: they could meet the Age of Order on their feet instead of being overtaken by it.

"All the world needs to do is let them," Hanno pleaded.

The night air had stillness to it in the wake of his words, the First Prince's face a bland mask as she studied him in silence.

"I can see it now, I think," Cordelia Hasenbach finally said, tone eerily calm. "The trap."

Hanno frowned.

"The Warden's?" he asked.

"The Intercessor's," the First Prince replied, shaking her head. "Because whoever wins, Hanno, whichever of us steps forward, something *breaks*."

"Something is lost when a claimant wins over another," Hanno slowly said. "That is only natural."

The blue-eyed princess half-smiled but did not explain.

"You do not need to be Warden of the West to achieve what you spoke of," she said instead.

"It is perhaps the only way to achieve it," Hanno replied, shaking his head.

"It was pointed out to me tonight on several occasions," the princess said, "that what Named do not follow laws or titles but the individual. It is power personal, not institutional, and that is the very thing you seek to preserve. Your successors, Hanno will not command the same respect."

"That can be trained," he replied.

"Can it?" she said, tone doubtful. "Even if that is the case, it will not change the bone of the matter: the respect will come again from the individual, not the Name. In other words, *the Name does not matter.*"

Hanno stilled. Looked for a reply, a rejoinder, a way to disagree.

"You can do all of this as the White Knight," the First Prince said. "You were already the shield of the heroes, Hanno, and you have little interest in the Accords themselves or the ministry of kingdoms. So why do you need to be the Warden of the West to do all this?"

He groped for his answer, feeling lost in a way he had not since the Light returned to him. And he found that he did not have one. That all the thoughts he had put together, building back the wall broken by the silence of the Tribunal, were built on a foundation that did not exist. It was true, all of it, but it was built on thin air. As if from the very moment he had heard- his stomach clenched. And there it was. The root of the mistake.

"Because," Hanno quietly said, "there is a Warden of the East."

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Clarity, Cordelia thought, could be such a cruel thing.

"We are not claimants," she said. "We are the bears in the pit."

And no matter who won, the bears always lost. The hero's face drew tight but, tellingly, he did not disagree.

"You believe the Intercessor is behind this," Hanno said. "How?"

"Gods, who knows?" the blonde princess tiredly said. "Perhaps she pulled strings at the Arsenal, or on the night we faced each other in Salia. It could be a hundred other little moments where a push or a pull made a difference and we would never know."

Her smile was bitter.

"Has anyone aside from the Black Queen ever been able to untangle her plots?"

The hero jerked back as if he had been slapped. That was answer enough, Cordelia thought.

"And so we damage Good, whoever becomes Warden," Hanno of Arwad said, sounding appalled.

"We already have," Cordelia said. "To add weight to my claim, I promised by abdication as First Prince to Rozala Malanza and her allies in exchange for their support. There is no going back."

"And I have let myself be crowned prince in all but name," Hanno quietly replied. "The divisions will no go away no matter who becomes Warden of the West."

It was worse than that, she thought. Thinking in the scale of the immediate it was a danger, but there was something else awaiting just beyond the horizon.

"Neither of us would have all of Good behind us," Cordelia said. "Neither of us would be her equal. And on that hobbled leg-

"-we would venture out to fight the Hidden Horror," Hanno finished through gritted teeth. "That is..."

Cordelia's understanding of namelore was still a shallow thing, but even she could see that it would be a catastrophe for two Wardens to face the Dead King without the full weight of what they claimed to stand for behind them. It would be going to war with a gap in your chainmail.

"Why would the Intercessor ever want this?" the Sword of Judgement asked. "She the Dead King's enemy as much as our own."

"She wants us to lose I think," the princess said. "So that when the darkest hour comes she can save us. Entirely on her terms."

The Wandering Bard had burned too many bridges to get her way otherwise. She could only dictate terms now if the only choice left was between her and annihilation.

"So she poisons the chalice long before we can think to drink," Hanno grimaced. "That fits her unpleasantly well. Foresight is two thirds of what makes her fearsome."

And Catherine Foundling was the one who had caught her out. Again.

"We would have torn each other to pieces until only one was left standing, if she had not done all this," Cordelia admitted.

If she had not come after their every preconception with a knife and dropped them here in the grass, like misbehaving children in need of making up. The dark-skinned hero peered at her closely.

"We have been wrong," Hanno of Arwad conceded. "That does not make her right."

"Bears in the pit, Hanno," Cordelia softly said. "You saw it before I did."

A long moment passed, silence hanging between them. The breeze caressed the grass.

"Journeys, not a battle," the Sword of Judgement murmured. "Yours. Mine. Hers."

Blue eyes met brown, an understanding. They could still end this right.

She did not know who took the first step, but they passed the threshold together.

## Chapter 39: Name (Redux)

*"Carry with you my blessing and my curse: may you ever get what you deserve."*

– Extract from the 'Tenets Under Night', Firstborn religious text

The fabric of Arcadia cracked around me and I grinned. I was so very, very close.

The Book of Some Things struggled furiously against the relentless onslaught of Night, but it had begun a slow descent into loss from the moment the first tendril slithered through a fracture. The artefact's power was constrained in a way that was literally inhuman, the precision impossible by mortal hands, but no matter how hard the nut if you hammered at it long enough you'd get something to show for it. Brute force all the way through would have taken days, maybe even an entire week, but that'd never been the plan. All the Night I could channel into relentless pressure without needing to guide the ritual had just been meant to create those fractures.

The precision work came after, widening the cracks and pulling apart the defences around the Book shard by shard. I could dip



out for a bit and let brute force fall down again, but I'd been embellishing the truth when I'd told people that the ritual could end without me. It was technically true, but if I wanted it finished tonight then I'd need to be personally involved. It why I'd rustled up my band of valiant villainous defenders in the first place: one I got my licks in with Hanno and Cordelia, I'd need people to cover for me while I did the labour of smothering the divine Light of hope. You know, metaphorically speaking.

... probably. It would have taken more power than this if I was literally killing hope, I reassured myself.

And the thing was that, deep down, I'd not actually expected this to work. I went against everything I'd been taught: I had cackled atop a flying tower, begun a massive ungainly ritual to destroy something Good while there were heroes in riding distance and just generally monologued at people who might be construed as my rivals should you squint a bit. I had, in other words, behaved in a way that would have made my father roll in his graves if he'd not been given to a pyre. Only now I was standing alone in a room so deeply drenched in shadows it might as well be the night sky, prying apart the shell of the Book as it shone like a furious star, and I was *winning*.

The Book burned, for a moment washing away even the slightest of shadows, but I snorted.

"Shouldn't have done that," I informed it. "Sure, as far as I can tell your source of power is pretty much inexhaustible, but your *outflow*..."

The burning Light suddenly flickered, and in the moment of weakness Night swallowed all it had lost and more. The Book struggled, burning bright twice more, but every time it burned shorter and ceded more ground afterwards.

"Like I thought, you have a fixed outflow," I told the Book. "Like veins, yeah? So when you come at me with all that fire, trying to chase me out of the room, you're cramming a lot more blood in those veins than there's supposed to be. Making them burst."

The Book pulsed, shadows shivering around it.

"You damaged yourself," I tutted disapprovingly.

And it opened the veins wider for me to slither through, not that I'd give it warning over that. I was still unsure exactly how intelligent the artefact was. Not sentient, as far as I could tell, but it was far from inert. There was a will in there, dumb and blind as it might be.

Leaning forward, I pulled at the Night. Picking through later after layer would have taken too long, especially the tighter shell nearer to the Book itself, but I'd been going deep instead of wide: I only needed to get to the artefact to finish this, not strip it naked. My flesh eye was half-closed, blinded by the Light, but under my eyecloth Night roiled and let me see through a hundred more. It was easier that way to pick my angle, slide between two jagged shards – invisible even to my weaves, only outlined by the press of Night against them – and slip into a crack. Not deep enough I thought, but I had a way around that.

"Hooks," I ordered, frowning.

Like a thousand little mandibles the Night slipped into the crack bit into the shard, anchoring itself to the power. Like a fishing line I spun out chords of Night from it and hung them behind me, into the great currents of darkness, before rolling a shoulder. Now I just had to put my back into it. All my eyes closed, I breathed out shallowly and emptied my mind. Distractions fell away one after another, swallowed up by the dark, until all that was left was a simple thought: *pull*. I sunk into it, made it fill me up to the brim for what must have been a hundred years.

A loud *crack* jolted me out of the state, the sound rippling across the fabric of Arcadia. A long, thin shard broke away and flew up from the massive pressure, disappearing into the currents of Night. I could feel the tapestry of Arcadia wane around me, like a tapestry used as a cutting board. Creation would have been more solid, but I'd chosen Arcadia because rules were looser here in the first place. It'd last long enough anyway, I thought as I learned forward even further. Now there was only a small, smooth shell no broader than my thumb keeping me from getting to the Book.

One more good hit and I was in. I sent out my will, Night rippling around me, and found Archer.

"Report," I ordered.

"Band of heroes coming from the hills," Indrani said. "Captured the Royal Conjurer, by the looks of it, but they're having a hard time with horses on the hill paths. The rest of our guests are contained."

There were only so many bands of five I had it in me to swat away tonight, so it'd be best to finish this as soon as possible. I'd given the would-be wardens every chance I had to spare. If they couldn't pull through now, it was on them.

"Do what you can to slow them down," I said.

There was beat.

"Cat, what's wrong?" Indrani asked.

"Nothing," I lied, and cut the tie.

Looking down, I saw that my hands were trembling. From the exertion, I told myself. Not from what I was about to do: attempt to steal Above's power and devour it whole. I clenched my hands.

"It's the best of the bad solutions," I told the Book. "My foundations will be weak, sure, but I'll have the power to take on the Dead King."

Just not, I thought, the power to survive him. When two peerless monsters entered the ring, only ruin ensued. I wasn't sure, couldn't be, but that was my gut said and these days it was so rarely wrong. I'd be fragile strength I took into the fight and the Hidden Horror would make me pay for that. Maybe I'd make it out anyway, merely crawl out broken, but the odds would be leaning the other way. I stared down my hands until they stopped shaking.

I was a few graveyards past a happy ending.

"So let's take a swing," I murmured, "and see where it gets me."

The power came easy: Night loved a winning battle. The Book's power felt smooth as an eggshell, without flaw, but I had broken through that before. The battering ram came down, the mangled globe creaking under the weight as I wielded the power in the most simple, brutal way it could be wielded. I waited and watched through a hundred eyes and one, following the shape of the power as it distended under the pressure. And, eventually, fissured. A small break, more along the curve of the last shell than inside it, but there was a slight indent.

I flexed my will, turning pressure to liquid as Night poured down through the slight opening before it could close. It would do. It was weak leverage, but when you had enough strength to wield that could be enough. I wove hook after hook, tightened the weave and raised my arm. I took the deep currents in hand, closed my eyes and *pulled*. Was I in the dark, or was I the dark? It was hard to tell where the border was. My own heartbeat felt distant, as if I'd been submerged, but I had a lifeline. The chords of Night in my hand, pulling at me as I had pulled at them.

I came back to the world to a splintering sound that echoed of a scream, the shell cracking and breaking as I breathed out and Night tendrils pulled and picked and ripped it all apart. All that effort, I thought as my eyes opened, to expose no more than a thumb's worth of the Book of Some Things. But exposed it was, and I reached out for the leather-bound book with my hand. Light burned, a sun howling in indignation that I dare to darken it, but I had veiled greater suns than this.

"Fall," I ordered, and Night obeyed.

The Light did not give an inch even as I drowned it in darkness, but the dark was patient. Like a candle starved of air I watched it burn and burn and burn until there was nothing left to consume but itself, and then that pride ate itself hollow. Until there was but a speck left, an ember, and the light dimmed. I had won.

Damn me, I had won.

My fingertips found the leather cold to the touch. Blindly angry, I ripped out the ember from the book and watched it wilt. I held the speck of Light in the palm of my hand and looked through the Night, to the threshold of my tower in this realm and another. The moonlight was blinding, a curtain of pale, but through it cut two stark silhouettes. The First Prince and the Sword of Judgement, crossing the threshold together.

"Good," I said. "*Good*. Now we end this."

—

They climbed the stairs unhindered, I saw to that.

The dark parted for them, like a tide receding, and I heard the sound of their steps on the stone long before they passed through the gate into the tower's heart. Neither of them hurried, neither of them slow: it was a pace like the beat of a drum. It had the taste of the inexorable to it. And when they came at last, entering a sea of Night broken only by the glow of the ember in my palm, the play of shadows cut the figure of them to the bone. As if only the crux of them was being shined upon, the rest of it claimed by the dark.

Hanno of Arwad, the tall knight with a workman's calloused hands. The sword at his side was little more than a line, his eyes a single streak of calm. Cordelia Hasenbach, the princess with the arrow-straight back. A raised chin and blue eyes burning cold.

Neither of them flinched away from the dark.

"You're late," I said.

My voice echoed across the Night, the only thing it did not swallow. No, instead the words reverberated across the room until the very last note faded, somehow faintly sounding of the cawing of crows. I felt talons digging into my shoulders, the presence of Sve Noc a tangible weight. I had the attention of my patronesses.

"But not too late," he replied.

His movement drew shape from light, the cut of his jaw and the length of the sword still in the sheath.

"Not so sure about that," I said. "Though at least the both of you made it here."

"Bears in the pit," she evenly said. "We saw. There is blinkered and there is blind."

A slash of pale gold across her brow, the whisper of long skirts against the stone.

"And what is it you see?" I scoffed.

"The lady of long strings, pulling at them still," he said. "Poisoning the chalice we are all to drink from."

Lips firmly set, the dull shine of a belt buckle.

"Too little," I said. "And much, much too late. If all you hold is what I hand you..."

My fingers closed around the ember of light, shadows like ribs cast on my face. I did not finish, crush it entirely and eat it whole, but the warning was plain. Better tyranny than a lackluster opposite. That mistake, at least, most of Calernia would live through.

"And what would closing that grip make you, I wonder?" she asked.

Curls like a river going down brocade, a tooth digging into skin to the very edge of piercing.

"The necessary evil," I smiled, all teeth under the hood. "You ought to be used to it by now."

"You are," he replied, blunt. "It is why you reach even when you should not."

Hair cut short I could make out the skin under, cloth hanging loose on his arm.

"What else is there?" I challenged. "I gave you warning. I bet you might live up to the boasts of your Gods, share a victory, but I see none of that before me."

"You see nothing," she said. "Because you are still in the pit."

A cheekbone like a crossguard, a blue sleeve hiding a hand. I almost laughed in Cordelia's face. Of course I was still in the pit. I'd started there, bleeding for silver, and odds were I'd die in there as well. Just because the pit got bigger and the toughs tougher didn't mean anything had changed.

"You've failed," I said, the regret in my voice honest. "Neither of you will stand. There is only one way left now."

*Through*, I thought.

"That is true," he acknowledged. "If you act alone."

The entire relief of him, for the briefest moment as he passed between two ribs: bruised but not beaten. A bearing of a fragile certainty. They were not yet done. I narrowed my eye at them, staring them down from all sides, but they were half shadows themselves in the depths of the dark.

"So I ask again," I said. "What else is there?"

"Bargain, Warden of the East," she said. "Do you not have the West before you?"

Half of her stood in the light, like she had been split in half: gold and winter and blue, for a heartbeat shone upon.

"Bargain instead of taking."

And she was gone, dress trailing a flutter behind her as she returned to the dark. My fingers, the ones still holding the Night, clenched. Knots formed around them. She was serious, I thought, and Hanno was not contradicting her. They were mad.

"Half the world?" I mused. "That will have a hefty price."

"Is that an excuse for stealing instead?" he asked.

The good hand on the Good sword, a shoulder pulling tight.

"I'll bite," I languidly shrugged. "What is it that you want for your half?"

"Give up power," Cordelia Hasenbach challenged. "Your hands should only hold so much: another must lead the Damned."

A glimpse of light, but all I saw was the eyes: cold and blue and hard as the iron her people had once named kings for. *You want me to step away*, I thought. *To become the sole keeper of the Accords and bind my hands with my own rules.* There would be captains for Above and Below but I would not be one of them, instead an arbiter between. My fingers clenched even further. Did she even begin to understand how much power she was asking me to throw away? Already I was abdicating my throne, was I to burn every last scrap of influence I held along with it? What she described, it would leave me no authority save through the Accords. While they kept their followings intact, giving up empty claims in exchange for the root of my own power.

"And while I cut my own legs the two of you will keep your seats, of course," I replied.

I shook my head, darkly amused.

"You people can never really lose, can you?" I said, smiling my father's smile.

"Can *you*?" Hanno of Arwad retorted.

All I saw in the light was his hand, the fingers cut to the phalange. Hanno's own bargain.

"On the cusp of your oldest trick, another ruin of a victory," he said, "do you have it in you to compromise anyway, Catherine Foundling?"

Night roiled with my anger. Another hero coming out of the cold asking me to meet them halfway after having stepped an inch to my mile. Another fairweather friend demanding my cloak. My fingers closed further around the ember, the shadow ribs pulling closer.

"Compromise takes from both sides," I bit out. "What is it that you're giving up?"

The two of them stood at the edge of the light, little more than silhouettes. The three of us around the heart of the Book, like three strangers huddled around a fire.

"I will abdicate all power in Procer," Cordelia said. "And spend the rest of my life in Cardinal serving the Accords."

"Their laws will have to be enforced on Named," Hanno said. "I will pledge my sword to the duty, under your authority."

I took half a step back. *Lose everything*, they'd demanded of me. And now they were offering everything in return. A simple solution, but the intricacies spun out along with my thoughts. She'd build Cardinal as a city and the skeleton of the Accords applied, the schools and the bureaucracy. And he'd make himself into the enforcer of the laws all Named must abide, the one sent into the breach when horror got loose. The both of them would grant legitimacy that I simply did not have, warlord that I was. And they would also be a noose around my neck: I could not ask dark deeds of that enforcer, I could not plot conquest past that chancellor.

Wings and an anchor at the same time. An elegant, balanced solution.

It just required me to be willing to give up every speck of authority I held beyond treaties that were still nothing more than ink on parchment. To let slip from my grasp every single thing I'd fought for since the night I had almost been strangled to death in an alley. Talons dug into my shoulders. My goddesses were watching, waiting. Wanting to hear my answer. I looked at the two silhouettes in the waning light, feeling the weight of their gazes and silence, wondering. Had the Sisters had felt

like this that night in the Everdark, when I had offered Winter and asked for salvation in return?

I got no answer from them but expected nothing else. After all, it was my turn on their side of the altar.

"Crabs in the bucket," I murmured. "It always comes back to that in the end, doesn't it?"

Having to trust that the others wanted to leave the bucket too, that they didn't just want to drag you back down. The leap of faith. And I still remembered what it was like, kneeling before silver eyes and asking the only thing you really could. *Help me. Please.*

"It might fail," I told them.

They waited, silent. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"But that's we always say, isn't it?"

My father had never understood, to the end, that sometimes it wasn't about winning. It'd gotten him killed. And maybe, I thought, this would get me killed too.

But it was the only way out of the pit, and what else could I do but try?

I released the Night, the knots around my hand unmaking themselves. The sea withdrawing around all three of us until the last ember of the Book shone like a firefly cradled in my hand.

"Half the world," I quietly said. "Bargain struck."

Cordelia stepped forward first, reaching out and gently unclasping my fingers. The ember burned against my palm, free. Hanno met my eye, leaning forward over the altar and smiling.

He blew out the Light.

Darkness swallowed whole the room, then it swallowed me too.

—

I woke up standing on ashes.

In the distance the wind howled, kicking up great clouds of ash and dust, and my leg was throbbing. My sword was at my hip, my staff in my hand. Both were cold to the touch. I pulled my cloak tight around me, shivering, and looked ahead. There was a great stone ramp there, leading to a broken city. It had been built in a tall plateau, which lay shattered as ash rained down from the sky and the wind whipped at hollowed out husks. I'd been here before, I knew. I'd fought to defend this city and lost.



"Hainaut," I murmured.

The wind gave no answer. The sky above was an endless stretch of storm clouds, red lightning crackling above and making itself known through the flashes of light. The whole world seemed coated in bleak grey light. I sighed,

"At least it isn't Liesse," I muttered. "We have haunted each other long enough."

Around us was a vast plain of ash, so there was only one way to go: forward, into the city. My leg felt like nails were being driven into it, but I pulled my hood down and limped towards the ramp. With every excruciating step, I could not help but think I had been here before. Not Hainaut, but the rest. This plain of ash. But I could not tell when or how, no more than I remembered how I had come here. All I knew was that my answers lay ahead.

The journey was long. The sky began to darken as the hours passed, shadows lengthening around me. But I reached the bottom of the slope, and there at last it all fell into place. Half-buried in the ash, revealed by a careless twist of wind, I found a corpse. A legionary, one of mine. Just some boy who couldn't have been older than eighteen, his skull split open and his eyes unseeing.

Come to a foreign field to die for strangers.

"Name dream," I said, then shook my head scornfully.

I glanced up at the sky.

"Death did not shake me when I was barely more than a girl," I told it, "and I've waded through oceans of it since. What did you expect?"

"For you to *learn*."

It had been many years since I'd last dreamt one of these dreams, but the woman who'd called out to me still felt like I'd seen her yesterday. Why shouldn't she, when she was wearing my face? Older than me, her hair cut short and her robes pure white, but we were still twins. At her hip a long and slender sword hung from her belt, pure silver, but that wasn't what drew my attention. She was holding some sort of case with a cloth draped over it.

"Added to your arsenal, I see," I amiably replied.

The doppelganger glared at me.

"And you still avoid the reproaches to which you have no answer," my twin said.

"I've learned a lot of things," I told her, half-smiling. "Just not the sort you like."

"Not the sort anyone should like," my twin said. "How many cities' worth of dead now trail in our wake, Catherine? Enough of them it might make up a kingdom. Your very own graveyard crown."

"Better my graveyard than the Dead King's," I flatly replied. "Mine, at least, will sleep in peace."

"They should have drowned us at birth," she said. "Evil as the act would have been, it would still have been better than the plague of a woman we turned into. Again and again you were given the choice to turn away, to do better, and where did that lead you?"

She gestured up at broken Hainaut.

"Ruin heaped on ruin," my twin said. "You are the worst of what we were as a girl, honed to a fine edge."

"You never learned how to compromise either, did you?" I asked. "You still think it's better to accomplish nothing than to do bad things."

"Look around you, Catherine," she gently said. "What is you've accomplished?"

My fingers clenched around my staff.

"You were wrong then," I replied, "and you're wrong now. Doing nothing is worse than being Evil. It's just *going along* with everything that's wrong with the world."

"And is it a better world you've made?" she asked me.

I breathed out, looking up at the sky. I could have been flippant, have made a joke of it, but it would have felt wrong. *This is the last time I'm ever going to see you, isn't it?* If I was to face my doubts manifest, I would face them honestly.

"Ask me when the war's over," I finally said. "When I'm no longer holding my sword."

Face unreadable, she slowly nodded.

"What now?" I asked her.

"I guide you into the city," my twin replied.

She pulled away the cloth, dropping it into the ash and revealing the wooden lantern below. There was no flame inside, I saw. It was an ember of Light, the same I'd seen Hanno blow out. Around us, night fell over the world.

"Follow me closely," she said. "The way is treacherous."

She was not lying. The streets were cracked, houses and towers falling apart as the wind mournfully twisted past them. The rain of ash blinded the view of the sky, the rare lightning and distant starlight crowning the clouds. Hainaut had been turned into a monument to ruin and death, corpses dangling from every edge and crammed in every nook and cranny. Under the lantern's light I glimpsed faces I had known, soldiers I'd once laughed with or ridden by. Once I thought I saw Nauk's face, scarred with Summer fire, but it was too far to be sure.

I made certain never to look too closely at any goblin's face.

"Usually I meet the other one first," I said, following her into the deeper city.

"Evil has always come easier to your hand," my twin curtly replied.

"But not tonight?" I asked.

"It was not it that bought you entry," she said.

Her tone made it clear the conversation was over and she ignored my other attempts to talk. I followed her in silence through the tomb of a maze, recognizing where we were headed: the heart of the city, where there had once been a reservoir of water. It'd been broken during the battle, the plateau split by sorcery and the wrath of the Firstborn. We found the other one there, sitting on a broken pillar by the edge of the drop as she ran a whetting stone along the edge of her blade. The clouds parted as we padded across the dust-covered stone, moonlight peeking through and wreathing her silhouette.

The other twin still had that pink scar across her nose, her long hair kept in a braid reaching down to her coat of mail. Regular's armour. She had a mangled look about her, worn down from war, but for once I was more worn than her. She wore a blood-specked tabard over the mail and a knife at her hip that I recognized even sheathed.

I would not soon forget the knife I'd used to kill my father.

"Ah, Cat," the Evil twin grinned. "Welcome back, my girl."

"'evening," I drawled. "You look in a fine mood."

The Good twin stepped to the side, silent and glaring.

"Shit, why *wouldn't* I be?" the scarred twin laughed. "It's been a long few years, Catherine, but look at us now."

She waved around the sword, enthused.

"We're basically Queen Bitch of Calernia," the Evil twin said. "Sure, it took a damned lot of killing to get there but that's why we've got a Hell of a throne to lounge on."

Ugh, a pun. There was a reason I'd killed her half the times we'd met. She leaned forward.

"And just between you and me, my girl?" she said. "It makes our legs look *good*."

"I don't do a lot of lounging these days," I noted. "It's actually pretty painful on the leg."

She rolled her eyes at me.

"Yeah, that's the one part I've some issues with," she said. "You need to cut that out. Fix your leg, put on your big girl pants and properly take this continent in hand."

"Should we now," I flatly said.

"You know we could," the Evil twin grinned. "It wouldn't even be that hard. A few clever choices while we pull down Keter on Neshamah's head and there'll be no one left who could stop us. Besides, we both know they're all going to be so pathetically *grateful* once we pull them out of the fire again."

"So the bargain I just made," I said, "I ought to discard it."

She smiled at me.

"Do you why I sit here?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"The view?" I guessed.

"That's one word for it," she said. "Come closer."

I limped forward, the lantern's light burning behind me and the moon above, until I stood at the edge of the drop. The plateau had been shattered, I knew, but down there I saw not a single loose stone. There might be some at the bottom, but how could I tell when a kingdom's worth of mangles corpses had been piled over it? I'd seen a lot of death, since I became the Squire and in the years since, but that sight still gave me pause. How many thousands were down there?

"Who are they?" I quietly asked.

"The city's the people who got us here," the twin said. "Those, they're the people we've killed. With wars, with choices, because it would have cost too much to save them."

My fingers clenched. *They should have drowned us at birth*, the other spirit had said.

"And that's the view you chose?"

"It's what we are, Cat," the spirit smiled. "The girl who did that. I just want you to stop fucking around and *own* it."

I looked down at the dead, unblinking.

"You never learned to lose," I finally said. "That's your mistake."

The spirit eyed me, unimpressed.

"Why would I want to?"

"Because when you look at these you see victories," I said. "It's the only way you know how to live: going from one fight to another, hoping that *one more battle* will fix it all."

I shook my head.

"It's prayer," I said. "Below's favourite kind. All in every time, until inevitably you lose it all."

"We haven't lost yet," the twin said. "I'll take those odds."

"They'll take you," I replied. "It's a rigged game. It's how they've always gotten us."

I looked back at the other spirit, who stood watching us with her lantern in hand. I stepped away from the edge.

"The first time I met you two," I said, "I killed you both."

"Good times," Evil twin grinned.

"The second time," I continued, "I left you behind."

"And the demon broke you," the other spirit replied.

Mistakes, I thought. Both times it'd been mistakes. And I'd never seen them with the Beast.

"It's the end of the road, you know," I quietly said. "There won't be another one after this."

Neither of them answered. Their gazes were on me.

"It's the third time," I said. "Let's make it count."

I breathed out, looking up at the moon through the parted clouds, and let myself loosen. Stopped trying to trick my way out of

this, to win it, to use it as a tool. It was a journey, nothing more and nothing less. A hand gripped my right shoulder.

"Do better," she whispered into my ear. "Remember the girl who wanted to save her home. She was always the best of you."

A hand gripped my left shoulder.

"Don't flinch," she whispered into my ear. "Remember the girl who wanted to be the storm. She's the one who got you here."

We stood the three of us under the moon, in the heart of broken Hainaut, as below us the corpses began moved. Not as a horde but as one, a behemoth of a creature rising from the cradle of death made of a hundred thousand corpses. It stood tall and terrible, blotting out the sky, watching me through a sea of dead faces.

"Hello, old friend," I softly greeted the Beast.

It opened a gaping maw, baring fangs made of broken swords and spears and banners. It was a beast, I thought, fit to swallow the world whole. West and East, what did it matter? It would devour it all.

"I once told you I wasn't afraid of you," I smiled. "But it was a lie. Did you know?"

It laughed, the sound a thing of horror.

"Let me tell you again, then," I said. "*I'm not afraid of you.*"

The behemoth of corpses climbed out of the pit, standing over me. An entire world of death enveloped me on all sides. I cocked my head to the side.

"Is it a lie now?" I asked it.

Its massive head lowered and it watched me, suddenly snapping out. I did not flinch.

"You know what we are now," I told it. "Who we are."

I looked up into its eyes.

"The Warden," I claimed, and the world shivered with the truth of it.

The Beast roared in approval. *Time to wake up*, I thought, and the great maw of death opened wide.

I never felt it close around me.

## Chapter 40: Resolutions

*"An empire is a barrel with a hole: you must never cease filling it, lest it spill out at your feet."*

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

I'd expected to wake up aching, but it was the opposite: it was like I'd had my best night of sleep in years. Maybe in all my life, I thought as my eyes fluttered open. It was like every ounce of me was sated with rest, a start from a blank state. But, as I found out moving under my covers, there were limits to the magic of that. My bad leg still throbbed like it was going to burst. A look around told me two things: I'd been brought to my rooms in the guest palace, and someone had been keeping watch on my sleep from the other side of the bed.

Seated in a chair wide enough it must have been brought just for him, Hakram met my gaze.

"You look tired," I said, the words escaping my mouth before I could think about it twice.

The tall orc shifted in his seat, the steel of his prosthetic hand brushing loudly against the cushions.

"I am," the Warlord replied. "Long days and short nights. You know how it is."

"Always too few hours in the day," I agreed, then hesitated.

We had been apart for long, but he could still read me better than anyone.

"You've been asleep for three days," Hakram gravelled. "They brought you to Archer in the tower, saying that eating the Book made you fall unconscious."

"It wasn't the Book, I don't think," I muttered. "More the transition itself."

He studied me carefully.

"I can believe that," the Warlord said. "I could feel the pull of your Name from outside the room even when you were unconscious and it is stronger now. More focused."

He wasn't joking, I saw. And the more my gaze lingered the more I saw. Not from my good eye but from the one the Hawk had taken, the hollow socket. I could... It was like the stars I had seen in the void as Warden of the East, but the perception had been refined. His Name was like a translucent fire raging over him, when I focused, and I could make out beating hearts. Only one had

solidified. *He has only one aspect*, I thought. And it went further than that. The more I watched the silhouette, the secret fire, the more I saw that it was connected. Chords spun out, stories I felt I might be able to follow by running my finger along the connection.

I should be able to see more, some bone-deep instinct told me, but I was being hobbled. The Warlord was a villain, and half of my eye was still in my enemy's hands.

"I became the Warden," I said.

His brow creased in surprise.

"Not of something," Hakram slowly said. "Just Warden."

"I suppose there's no need to specify," I replied, "if I'm Warden of everything."

The air shivered in the room. He felt it too. And yet I was still a villain, I thought. Night still came when I called. Transitioning had not changed who or what I was, only amplified it. It would be the same after me: a hero could hold this Name as well. The Role of standing above Named, at the top of the Accords, it did not belong to either Above or Below. It would be what we made of it, because it was *us* who'd made the Liesse Accords. For good or ill, it was in our hands.

Hakram was still watching me, face unreadable.

"All of the Woe have gone through two Names," he said, "save you. It took you three to settle."

I hummed, pensive. That was one way to see it.

"There's always a cost," I said.

I'd given up much to come into this Name, at least in the way that I had. Would I have been a simpler sort of villain, if I'd taken the Book by force instead of taking it with the blessing of the two claimants to the West? My gut said yes. Still a Warden, maybe, but more a Warden of the East bloated for having devoured the other side's strength than the more... balanced mantle I now wore.

Hakram suddenly grimaced, looking away.

"I was not fair, when we spoke in the thicket," he said.

I frowned.

"What's bringing this on?"



"Until I found Archer, I did not know whether you were dead or alive," Hakram said. "I trusted, Catherine, but I could not be sure. And so I thought of our last conversation again, that it might be the last words we ever spoke."

"Lancing a wound is never pretty," I said.

"Aye," Hakram said, "but while it was not only you I was angry with, you still received both helpings of blame."

I made to speak, not sure what I should, but he raised a hand to ask me to let him speak. My teeth clicked shut. Fine.

"Did I ever tell you," he asked, "what the Tyrant saw when he used his perception aspect on me?"

I shook my head. I'd always assumed that Hakram was even keeled enough Kairos had simply seen nothing to use against him.

"Nothing," Hakram quietly said.

My breath caught. That was, well... I took a moment to digest that. What it meant, that he'd had so little in his life except for me and the Woe.

"I used to think it was a virtue," the Warlord said. "That I could step away and see clearly because of it. But that was fear, looking back. It was easier to want the things you did, dream your dreams, than have my own. And maybe if things had gone differently, I would have spent a life satisfied with that."

I breathed in sharply. I could see where this was going.

"But then you saw Scribe," I said.

"I saw too much of myself in her," Hakram said. "And did not like what I saw."

I sighed.

"And what does that mean, Hakram?" I pushed back. "I get it – you thought I might one day do to you what my father did to her. Cut her adrift after a lifetime. But why are you telling me this?"

We'd already tread those grounds, revisiting them would do no good.

"I stand behind much of what I said that day," he said, "but you did not deserve all the anger you received. For that I owe apology."

He paused, reluctant.

"And you were right about one thing."

His jaw clenched.

"I could have come to you with it," Hakram gravelled. "I did not. I do not regret becoming the Warlord, Catherine, but I dislike the thought that part of what drove me was fear – that deep down I thought it easier to return bearing the Name than to speak to you as the Adjutant."

I studied his face for a long time, the craggy green leather of it, and found only calm there. Slowly, I gave a nod. But I did not speak after, because the conversation was not over and it was not for me to finish it. We'd parted on my words, last time. If there was to be an ending it would be of his own ushering, whatever it might be. The silence lengthened.

"You told me it was all in my hands, last time," Hakram finally said.

"And meant it."

He did not hurry to words, which I was not sure whether to curse or appreciate. If it was to be the knife, then let him be quick with it. I'd need the time to lick my wounds.

"I never thought you would ever turn a knife on me," the tall orc admitted. "Leave me behind, maybe, but never steel."

His clenched his fingers of bone into a fist.

"I saw it in your eyes that night," Hakram said. "But I don't think I believed it until you spoke the words out loud."

Part of me felt the urge to apologize, to bury the hatchet at any cost, but I took it by the neck and *squeezed*. I was who I was. Maybe I still had some change left in me, but not so much as that: in the end, if the stakes were high enough I had run out of lines I wasn't willing to cross to win. Suddenly, he snorted.

"It is a crooked thing," he said, "but in a way it reassures me. You didn't just see the Adjutant that night, you saw me."

"I saw you," I evenly replied, "and raised a knife."

He shook his head.

"I came as the Warlord," Hakram said, "and stood against you. I cannot leave your shadow and in the same breath demand its protection."

I studied him quietly.

"And now?"

"I don't know," he quietly laughed. "It is new ground for me as well."

I bit my lip.

"It can't be the way it was before," I said.

"I don't want it to be," Hakram honestly said. "Do you?"

Yes, part of me whispered. But could I really ask that when I now knew what'd it cost him?

"No," I replied, and found I largely meant it. "But now I'm at a loss. I've never—"

*Lost someone I love to anything but the grave, I thought. I don't even understand how I got your friendship the first time, how could I possibly know what to do now?*

"- I've never," I weakly finished.

He laughed at me, the prick.

"Eloquent," he teased, smiling at my rude gesture.

The mirth passed, though never quite entirely left.

"We start from the beginning," Hakram said, leaning forward and offering his arm.

When we'd first met in the valley all those years ago, I remembered, I'd been the one to offer. Lips quirking, I clasped the arm in a legionary's salute. It was steel I felt under my fingers now, and his own found the cloth that these days I wore more often than mail, but it was better this way. We weren't the same kids we'd been in Spite Valley, playing war games in the Tower's shadow. It wasn't the same two people meeting. We parted after a moment and he drew back, rising to his feet.

"There may not be much time, in the coming days," he said.

To meet, he meant. To try to forge the scraps of what we used to be into something else.

"So we'll have to make it," I firmly replied.

He nodded, hesitation coming to his face.

"In Keter," Hakram said, "there will come a time beyond armies. When Named will venture ahead."

I nodded. We both knew the Dead King wouldn't die to anything as mundane as armies.

"When that time comes," he quietly said, "I would like to fight with the Woe."

My heart clenched. To that, at least, I had an answer.

"If the Woe are fighting," I simply replied, "where else would you be?"

I saw a weight leave his shoulders, and some part of me wanted to weep. When had it come to this? *Lancing a wound is never pretty*, I reminded myself. But it was necessary, if the limb was to heal instead of fester. Hakram stiffly nodded at me, and a heartbeat later he was gone. Out the door and into the palace, leaving behind him an absence that felt almost physical. I leaned back into my pillows. Soon enough someone else would enter the room and Creation would come calling, responsibilities dragging me back, but for now I just closed my eyes and listened to the sound of my own breathing. It was a faint thing, barely more than a wisp, but I remembered what hope felt like.

And for the first time in months, I held hope that the pieces of who we'd been might not stop the people we'd become from finding a way to fit together.

—

Proceran palaces grew salons like caves grew mushroom, but one of the upsides of that cultural sickness was that you could send for a drink anywhere. I was not surprised in the slightest that Cordelia's personal steward not only knew that I drank an herbal concoction for pain but the exact mix as well. Aisha ought to be flattered that her old family recipe had become subject to foreign espionage, I figured, and it really was quite convenient. I finished the mug – served at the perfect temperature to drink, because *of course* it was – and set it down on a pretty little glass table, trying to tell the Sword of Judgment through my eyes that his hovering was getting on my nerves.

"Another day of rest might be forgiven, given the circumstances," Hanno said.

Evidently, I needed to work on my glares.

"Time's the one thing we can't spare," I replied. "Besides, I'm fine."

I was not, in fact, fine. I was still a little slow on my feet and... unsteady. Sometimes it felt like I didn't fit in my own skin anymore, that I was moving with limbs there weren't my body's. From the steady look the dark-skinned man fixed me with, he was well aware of the lie and debating whether or not he should call me out on it. Fortunately, I had a secret weapon.

"I will not venture an opinion as to Her Excellency's health," Cordelia Hasenbach mildly said, "but she does seem fit for light duties such as discussion."

That Excellency business was going to get old fast, I could already feel it. And it was probably half the reason she was sticking so closely to the title, because underneath all that courtesy Cordelia did have a streak of bitingly polite pettiness.

"See," I smiled, "we're just talking. And we've got a lot of grounds to cover, so let's be about it."

Hanno dared to roll his eyes at me as he took a seat, the absolute ass, and I was not sure whether to be pleased or insulted. It'd taken only moments in the same room to realize that in the aftermath of our little tiff in Arcadia he'd considerably warmed to me. Being willing to take a step back and meet them halfway had not quite restored our relationship to the easy friendship of the early days, but it was a damn sight better than the cool distance that'd followed the Arsenal. I'd had a few looks at him through my dead eye, the one that saw much, and found him covered in burning pale flames. He did not quite have a Name, but it was not far.

I tried to have a look ahead, see what he was moving towards, but it was too tricky when I had to maintain a conversation at the same time.

"There are urgent matters," Cordelia agreed. "Negotiations with the Kingdom Under must be carried out to a finish before we march on Keter, which I consider the priority of the Grand Alliance's foreign diplomacy, but there are internal matters to settle."

She, on the other hand, did not have so much as a fleck of power gathering around her. Cordelia Hasenbach had fallen on the side of being true to the woman she had been on the floor of the Chamber of Assembly: mortal to the bitter end.

"The compromise between the Blood and the Bestowed," I said.

"To begin," Cordelia agreed. "Though on grounds more esoteric, I believe there is question in need of an answer as well."

She slid a look at Hanno when she said 'esoteric', getting a nod out of him.

"The Severance needs a wielder," he plainly said. "The decision must be made before we set out north."

I hummed, leaning back into the plushy seat.

"All of that starts second place," I finally said. "Before anything else, we need to properly enforce the arrangement we made in Arcadia."

Cordelia's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Settling the representatives under the Truce and Terms," she said. "You mean to step down immediately."

"From that position," I agreed. "I'll still be Queen of Callow until we finish things in Keter, at least in principle. In practice I'll begin passing authority to Vivienne as of today."

I didn't even foresee friction there for the rest of the war. Viv wasn't much of a general and knew it, while I'd made a career off of handing off the ruling parts to someone else why I went about the business of being a warlord. It was only fitting that my last war would end my reign with it.

"I am glad," Hanno said. "Princess Vivienne is respected, but your legions would not fight for another queen as they do for you."

I waved that away, though I was a little flattered. It was true, I knew that regardless of him, but hearing it from someone like Hanno added a certain something.

"We've been through a lot of mud together," I said. "But back to the selection: the first thing to settle is whether or not you'll be standing to represent the heroes."

If he did not it would be a race, I figured, but as I saw it there was little chance of anyone else filling the shoes if he wanted to keep them on.

"That is my wish," Hanno said. "Until the fall of Keter I would keep the office, setting it aside when I swear myself to enforce the Accords."

I had no trouble with that, to be honest. I would have accepted it even before our relations thawed, so my approval was only growing. There was one potential source of objections, though, sitting pretty in her seat as she delicately sipped at lemon water. Cordelia noticed my inquisitive glance, which I hadn't tried to make subtle in the slightest.

"It is not my place to argue for or against," the First Prince evenly said. "When we struck a bargain, Your Excellency, I accepted your authority over certain matters. I will not go back on my word."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"And if were to ask for your opinion?" I pressed.

She did not look pleased, but neither did she fight me.

"It is the natural choice," Cordelia admitted. "And it will ease the tradition from the Truce and Terms into the Liesse Accords."

She still didn't like him much, I thought. The esteem they'd once had for each other had been eroded down by years of speaking past each other and it would just as many years for it to be restored. If it ever was. But she was willing to work with him and not the kind of woman to blind herself to someone's virtues because of a personal animosity.

"I'll look forward to you taking your seat again, then," I said, nodding at Hanno.

Then I sighed.

"The selection on my side of the fence is going to be a little more complicated, unfortunately," I admitted.

Of the Woe, both Archer and Hierophant had the strength to be able to claim the seat as well as strong ties to me that'd help them keep it. The trouble was that neither of them would want to get anywhere near that seat given a choice and this wasn't the kind of position to take half-heartedly. Not even just until the end of the war. Keter was going to be vice tightening around Named and we'd need steady hands at the helm if we were going to keep all these very dangerous people from cracking under the pressure.

"You have been grooming the Barrow Sword as a captain for almost two years now," Hanno noted. "Do you not think him fit?"

"There's going to be a brawl," I frankly said. "And I'm not sure he can take the Red Knight, who will absolutely throw her hat into the ring."

And she was strong enough she'd be able to chew through most Named in a fight, but she'd be a fucking disaster as a representative. For one, at least nine tenths of everyone who ever met her couldn't stand her. If she were just awful as a person it'd be one thing, but from the reports I'd read she was unfit to command even a band of five. Hanno grimaced.

"Even Christophe is wary of her," he said. "And he is not a man to scare easily."

It was her aspects that made her a threat. By simple ability she was a very skilled fighter but hardly impossible to handle. When you threw in **Devour**, though, she became a headache to handle. If there was anything that aspect couldn't take a bite out of, we'd yet to encounter it.

"I believe you once sent the Archer to discipline her, after a brawl with other villains," Cordelia noted.

"I'd bet on Indrani over her," I agreed. "But Indrani won't want anything to do with those responsibilities."

She'd made it very clear to me that command of a roving warband was the most she was interested in taking up.

"You misunderstand me," the First Prince said. "I mean to point out that you, the appointed representative for Below, saw it fit to use her as your champion."

Ah, I thought. Clever. Archer wouldn't want the seat, but she would absolutely be willing to fight as Ishaq's champion should he be challenged – and I'd set precedents for that over my own tenure to no objection from my charges. Trust Cordelia Hasenbach to find the loophole no matter the game.

"That might work," I acknowledged. "I'll need to speak with the both of them first."

Hanno politely cleared his throat.

"Have you considered," he asked, "the possibility of the Warlord laying his own claim?"

"He won't," I said, certain. "He's got too much on his plate already, herding the Clans and hammering out the aftermath of the peace in Praes."

I'd had to juggle the duties of a queen and a representative before and I'd found the amount of work crushing even with the likes of Hakram and Scribe supporting me. And that was ruling Callow, leading professional armies. The Clans would need much more personal a touch than my people ever had.

"But if he does?" Hanno pressed.

"Then I won't stand against or for it," I replied.

He'd left me to stand on his own two feet. I would not disrespect that by propping him up should he reach for more. That settled the talk of selection, at least for a moment, so I let Cordelia gently guide the conversation back to other matters.

"The talks with the Blood can be ended promptly," she said, "and it would set a good tone to act swiftly. For a Warden to settle what was before a matter of debate will begin to prove the worth of the office."

Going unsaid was that a lot of heroes would find it hard to swallow no matter what the Sword of Judgment said, even when they felt the pull of my Name against them. Being decisive from the



start would do a lot to convince people it was worth ceding authority to me. It occurred to me, after a moment, that I'd never told either of them what my Name now was. And yet the both of them had been referring to it freely since we met. I almost shivered.

Sometimes fate's hand was less discreet than others.

"You're not going to like what I have to say," I bluntly told her. "The entire point of having a Warden is to have someone who can settle disputes involving Named. Sometimes that will mean having power over signatory nations even if you don't like it. A very narrow sort of power, relating only to Named, but it'll still be there."

She visibly did *not* like what I had to say.

"You have already heard my arguments," the First Prince said. "I believe it a poor precedent to set that a decision of Levant's ruling council might be overturned by Named on account of Named."

She paused, mastering herself.

"Yet that is not my decision to make," Cordelia conceded. "That is the bargain I struck with you. And the existence of a single office instead of rival ones does put to rest certain fears of partisanship I had previously held."

I considered her for a moment, honestly a little doubtful she'd given in so easily. Maybe I shouldn't have been, I eventually thought. She'd been the First Prince, not a queen, and that wasn't the same thing. Especially not the kind of queen that I'd been, inheriting a culled nobility and direct authority over most of the largest cities in Callow as well as the only standing army. I had a lot more power than most Fairfaxes ever did. Cordelia Hasenbach, though, had been wrestling with the Highest Assembly all her reign. She'd had to give ground before, I thought, suffer defeats on matters she very much cared about.

She would exercise the power she could to the letter of the law and no further, taking the defeats when they came and living to fight the battle another day. That was her way.

"Good," I muttered, flicking a glance at Hanno. "And you?"

"I have no more objections now than I did before," the dark-skinned hero shrugged.

Fair enough.

"Then it's settled," I said. "I'll sit down with the Blood tonight and get the terms put to ink."

With that out of the way, Hanno himself brought up the next decision in need of being made.

"Have you given thought to the Severance?" he asked.

I clenched my fingers, unclenched them. Give and take, that was what'd brought us here. I had not come out ahead by listening to the tyrant's whisper in the back of my head.

"Only a hero can wield it," I said, "so that takes it out of my hand. Should you be chosen as representative for Above again, I'll leave the decision in your hands."

My gut said either him or the Mirror Knight, but it was hard to be sure. Hanno watched me with those calm, patient eyes.

"You will want the final word," he stated.

I did want that. Very much. My instincts demanded it, a precaution in case the heroes fucked up again and some unfit idiot ended up wielding the single most important artefact of this war. But it couldn't be that way.

"This only works if I trust your judgement," I made myself say. "So I'll trust your judgement, Hanno."

The translucent flames around him I could see, if I concentrated hard enough, only had a single solid heart within them – and it tasted of memory. **Recall**, had to be. He'd lost the aspect he had once called on every time he flipped that coin of his, likely forever. It was Hanno of Arwad's judgement I was betting on, not the Tribunal's, and trust didn't mean anything if it was offered on the cheap. He did not hide his surprise, or the strange emotion that flickered through his eyes after.

"Thank you," he finally said. "I will keep you informed."

I nodded, uncomfortable, and was dimly grateful when Cordelia nudged the conversation towards what she most cared about. Hanno went along just as easily, which was only natural considering he'd also put quite a bit of his back into dealing with the dwarves.

"A united front when meeting them again would improve our position," Cordelia said. "The three of us, certainly, and perhaps the representative for Below as well."

"Sure," I said, "but that's posturing, not substance. We need something to come at them with. I don't suppose you'd care to share what it is you've been digging up in the Salian archives all this time?"

"Ah," the First Prince faintly smiled, "then it was you."

I cocked an eyebrow, admitting nothing.

"Or Princess Vivienne perhaps," Cordelia said. "Thieves of her skill are passingly rare."

"She's a princess now, you know," I chided. "She doesn't steal anymore."

I let a beat pass.

"When a princess steals from foreigners, it's called diplomacy."

The only born royal out of the three of us was less than amused, but I caught Hanno's lips twitching. Yeah, of course that one would agree. I doubted the fucker had paid taxes to anyone since age sixteen, ascetic vagrant that he was.

"So?" I pressed.

"It occurred to me after our talks with the Herald of the Deep that we were missing the forest for the trees," Cordelia said. "We thought of the cities and why he wanted them, but did not consider *how* they would be held."

"Strength, presumably," I said. "Assuming they get to cram their terms down our throats."

"Strength would involve dwarven arms," the First Prince pointed out.

Well, yes. It wasn't like they were lacking in either manpower or armaments. They'd just seeded colonies across the northern third of Calernia while simultaneously providing arms for large armies across several fronts.

"I don't see your point," I admitted.

"It would mean dwarves on the surface," Hanno said. "Thousands for every city, come to live under the sun permanently."

I blinked. Shit, they were right. I was so used to thinking in terms of the Kingdom Under just being another empire to deal with that I'd forgotten this demand was breaking a long-term policy of isolation from the surface. The most dwarves Calernians usually saw were mercenaries hired through Mercantis.

"That's a lot of people away from their usual centres of power," I muttered. "At a time where their population's being spread out up north."

Was there even a precedent for dwarves ever sharing a city with someone? I couldn't recall one offhand.

"I imagine the Kingdom Under sees it as installing an armed ruling caste," Cordelia said. "They chose cities instead of empty land for a reason. But in practice, the Herald is achieving something else entirely."

"Three city-states sitting atop massively profitable trade routes to the underground," I finished, "and little to no real oversight. Outrageously wealthy pocket kingdoms for him to rule over."

The First Prince nodded.

"I attempted to discern the worth of the trade involved and acquire an idea of the Kingdom Under's wealth," she said. "While you were asleep, I finished the work as much as it will ever be."

I cocked my head to the side.

"And?"

"For at least the next two centuries, the cities would represent more wealth than the entire Fourteenth and Fifteenth Expansion put together," Cordelia said, "while involving less of a tenth of the people involved in these."

So small, rich kingdoms living under the protection of the prominent military power of Calernia.

"Sounds like a golden retirement to me," I frankly said. "With just enough challenges to tackle he won't ever get bored."

"My thoughts exactly," the First Prince coldly smiled.

"You're wrong."

I'd almost forgotten Hanno was there. I turned an eye to him, skeptical.

"There's speculation," I conceded, "but the foundations are solid."

"You are also taking the most uncharitable interpretation as fact," he pointed out. "Not unreasonably, given the Herald's behaviour, but it blinds you to a truth."

"And what would that be?" Cordelia asked, tone cutting.

"I do not know what the Role of a Herald of the Deeps is," Hanno said, "but if he was seeking to leave that life behind his Name would be weakening."

He met my gaze.

"Having been in the same room as him, did you sense such a thing?"

I chewed my lip.

"No," I admitted. "And if it'd been there, I would have sensed it."

My sense of Names had become unusually keen after I became Warden of the East. The dwarven Name had felt odd to my senses, but in no way broken or fading. Which meant Hanno was right.

"So he's trying to fulfill his Role still," I noted. "That's interesting. How would pocket kingdoms help the Kingdom Under?"

"A queen's perspective," Hanno admonished.

I narrowed my eye, mentally taking a step back and looking at it another way.

"He's a hero, so he's trying to help *part* of the kingdom," I corrected. "The downtrodden. Not the whole realm, and certainly not in a ruling sense. The gains their empire make through this are just how he sells it back home. The city-states are what he's *actually* after, not the profits."

"They would earn him the support of the expansionist faction," Cordelia said. "Which he had suspected to be his backers within the Kingdom Under."

*Fuck*, I thought, that actually made a great deal of sense. Even if the expansionist were assholes, the ones who wanted to make gains at the expense of the people of the surface, the Herald would have nowhere else to go. I could see the pattern now: two leading philosophies underground, one of isolation and one of expansion. Even if there was a dusting of evil or even Evil in the expansionists, the Herald would make common cause with them. He *had* to, because he wanted to reform his people and the only other game in town saw dwarven society as a closed circle.

"It fits with where I first met him," I admitted. "Leading the Fourteenth Expansion, on the very outskirts of dwarven territory. He's trying to get out from under the thumb of people in power by going into the wilds."

The First Prince considered that, then slowly nodded.

"Form the perspective of attempting to reform custom, the city-states described would be an ideal garden," Cordelia said. "Small populations of like-minded dwarves, large wealth based on trade instead of labour and more numerous foreign peoples around them to erode the old ways. It is a well-crafted plan."

One that the Herald had rushed the encirclement of the Dead King to sell to his people, immediately knocking at our door afterwards. The details really did fit, Crows. I could sympathize with the intention if it was really this, even admire it a bit, but none of it changed that all those pretty things would literally be built on our backs. That the Herald was willing to let thousands and thousands die, gamble with the fate of Calernia and blackmail desperate nations to get his reforms. That was... *Fuck me*, I thought. Yeah, not exactly an unfamiliar situation. Just not the way I was used to it.

So this was what it felt like, facing me across a table.

"So we know what he's after," I said. "Now we're in a position to fight back."

"It has been brought to my attention that a dwarven gate was recently unearthed," Cordelia said, the look she flicked Hanno's way rather cool. "We can make use of it to reach out to the isolationists and out his plot."

"Must we?"

I frowned at Hanno. He trusted heroes more than I thought wise, even now, but he wasn't a fool. He wouldn't argue for the cession of three cities – one of which was part of the League, not even the Grand Alliance! – to the Herald because he was trying to accomplish something Good through dubious means. I suspected that, if anything, ye ol' Sword of Judgment would think worse of the Herald's methods than we did. Unlike Cordelia and I, he expected better of heroes.

"What the Herald seeks it not evil or harmful to the rest of Calernia," Hanno elaborated. "It is his approach that is objectionable. If he can get his way without it being at our expense, would it not be better to attempt that bargain?"

"Is there a way for him to get his way save at our expense?" Cordelia skeptically replied.

"If it is a city and the riches of a land the Herald seeks," Hanno said, "there is one we can offer."

It took me a moment to realize what he was getting at.

"Keter," I disbelievably said. "You mean the Crown of the Dead."

"It is a great city, surrounded by lands that were once rich," he said. "And unlike the cities demanded it will stand empty once the war ends."

"Keter is part of the land that was promised to the Firstborn for their participation in this war," I said. "How many homes are the dwarves going to steal from them?"

"Would the drow truly want the city?" he honestly asked. "I was given to understand they made their own in the Duskwood."

"That's twice now powers have tried to go back on that bargain," I coldly warned. "Alliances have been broken over less."

He shook his head.

"I do not mean for a treaty to be breached," Hanno said. "Let them trade the claim, by all means. There must something in the Herald's hands worth more than a claim over a city they might never inhabit."

I hummed. That was, well, more acceptable. Given the losses the Firstborn had taken in the war with Keter, I honestly wasn't sure they could colonize all of the lands that were now the Kingdom of the Dead. They might genuinely be amenable to a trade, if the dwarves offered up something worth the exchange. The problem with that, though, was...

"Nearly all of what makes the demanded cities attractive to both the Herald and the expansionists is absent in Keter," Cordelia said. "It is far from trade and there are no humans within that might be used for labour. They will not accept that bargain."

Yeah, that.

"His backers would not," Hanno said, "but the Herald himself might. We are trying to work past him when we should be working with him."

We were going around the bastard because he was willing let a third of Procer be blighted to get his way, not because we just felt like being *poor sports*, but I forced myself to consider his words anyway. Hanno, for all his flaws, understood heroes better than I did – the way they thought, the way they moved. I closed my eye and opened the other. Not looking at Hanno himself but beyond, fingers running down the strings of story. Was he right, was there a path?

Was there a lever to move the Herald of the Deeps?

I felt myself drift, following the chords until I found something at the other end. A force, a will, a Name. An entity that I could only dimly make out, this far from it, but I could see something. Three hearts, all solid, but there was something... deeper. A glimpse at the strings that would move him, the way they tasted. Love, I saw. The Herald was driven by love. Made greater, projected to many, but at its source intensely personal. And

personal was a creature that could be moved by more than just stick and carrot. I breathed out deeply, closing one eye and opening another.

Both of them were staring at me.

"Catherine?" Hanno cautiously said.

"I was having a look at our friend," I replied, tone steady. "I saw enough to think your method has merit."

Cordelia looked rather skeptical.

"He's doing this out of love," I told her. "That much I'm certain of. Romantic and personal, everything else grows from there."

"Love," the First Prince of Procer said, "is not a sound political strategy."

Hanno looked about to disagree and I wanted no part of that debate so I cut in.

"I agree," I said. "But we lose nothing by attempting to move him first. Prepare the appeal to the opposition in the Kingdom Under, and if the talks with the Herald fail we can proceed with that plan immediately."

"It would be best to negotiate entirely in good faith," Hanno protested.

"So far he hasn't," I pointed out. "I see no need to reward that with trust he has done nothing to earn."

He did not look pleased and neither did the First Prince, but neither of them stormed out of the room. That was something.

"Another compromise," Cordelia said. "You seem to have acquired a taste for those."

"If I have on redeeming quality, Your Highness, it's that I never hesitate to steal the methods other people beat me through," I smiled.

I did not get a laugh, which was only sensible since I'd not truly been joking. With an agreement in principle, we hammered out a few more of the details and split off to see to our parts. It would all have to wait until the representatives were chosen, anyhow, so there was still time.

Too little of it, but wasn't that always the way?

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I had the talks with the Blood settled by nightfall and a treaty after dinner. By tomorrow the rest of the Grand Alliance would be informed, as even though it was an internal matter of Levant it involved the Liesse Accords. That part, as the First Prince had predicted, benefitted from decisive action. It was the other talks of the two following days that had me itching. The most frustrating part about the representatives being chosen was that I couldn't be directly involved. As the Warden I stood apart, so I would not even have a seat in the council of villains past explaining why it was now needed.

All I could do was stack the deck behind closed doors and hope.

Hanno was chosen on the morning of second day, by a wide margin. It took until Midnight Bell for the villains to finish and the Pilfering Dicer almost died – accused by the Red Knight of having interfered in her duel with Archer. But we got our way, in the end. The Barrow Sword was chosen as the representative, narrowly, after Indrani managed an equally narrow draw against the Red Knight. His position was still weak, but Ishaq was no fool: he'd move to consolidate, aware he had my blessing to take everything in hand.

I doubted Below's lot would be as firmly in hand as when my reputation had been making people think twice, but it would serve. Gods, it would have to. Soon the League and the second wave of Praesi troops would be arriving, and when they did the march north would begin shortly after. There were only a few matters left to settle.

—

Hierophant had told me he needed five days to prove whether the Rogue Sorcerer's theory had been right, and he was punctual to a fault: at noon on the fifth day, I sat before a mirror through which we faced each other.

"Roland was correct," Masego told me. "We were looking for a source of power that might shatter the Intercessor's grip on stories, and we have found one."

I was too early to be relieved, I warned myself.

"So what *is* it, exactly?" I asked.

"Night," Hierophant replied.

I blinked. Was it really going to be that easy?

"More precisely, Night as it was first granted to Sve Noc by the Gods Below," Hierophant specified.

Ah, and there was the pinch.

"I shouldn't need to tell you that pretty much all Night has passed from some Firstborn body at some point," I pointed out.

The drow had been very ardent proponents for centuries of murdering each other for that power.

"Some, yes, but not all," Masego said. "The Sisters have administered the resource since the beginning, Catherine. They still hold the power they used to create their shared godhead, which was bestowed directly by Below."

"So the Crows could do it," I said.

"They could be used to channel Night against the Intercessor, whom you've informed me had a hand in granting it to them in the first place," Hierophant corrected. "They could not do it themselves, by my estimation. At the very least you – or someone of equivalent strength in Night – and myself would need to guide the ritual."

I grimaced.

"You want me to head north just as the armies begin to march on Keter," I said. "That's not a small ask, Masego."

"Nor is breaking the hold of the goddess of stories on her domain," Hierophant bluntly replied. "You asked me for a solution and you have it. There is nothing more I can do."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Can we really spare you?" I asked. "The crown of Autumn–"

"Has been carved into what we sought," Masego interrupted. "It will be the cursed gift to the Dead King that we planned. And while I would prefer to be there when it is used, should the necessity strike my presence is not required. Roland and the Blessed Artificer would both be capable of using it without me."

And both would be with the armies. I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I didn't like it, to be honest, and it went against the grain for me to leave all the preparations behind. But it couldn't be denied that if we didn't get back Evil's stories, the Dead King would snap us over his knee. Much as I'd like to pretend otherwise, I didn't really have a choice.

"Well then, pack up and join me in Salia," I said. "Look like we're headed to Serolen."

I had a week until he was there, so I had better spend it well: after that, there would be no going back.

## Chapter 41: Passing

*"Forty-four: never refuse a companion come to join your journey at the last moment. Whether true or traitor, they represent a necessary opportunity."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

The heroes had come together in one of their little councils and a verdict emerged: when all marched on Keter, the Mirror Knight would wield the Severance.

I'd hoped it would be Hanno instead, but I would make my peace with the decision. It wasn't like he'd be keeping the sword after the war anyway – it had been made in the Arsenal, so by treaty it would be going into a vault under Cardinal as soon as one was built. It would see the light of day again if a Warden saw a threat emerge that it should be wielded against, but I had my doubts there would be another of those in my lifetime. Vivienne had the Jacks keep an eye on Christophe de Pavanie afterwards and they noted he did not seem to feel particularly happy about the choice.

Rumour had it he'd argued against his own candidature, though even my friends among the heroes remained tight-lipped. Knowing their kind, trying to refuse the charge had probably swayed a few more in favour of him taking up the sword. Still, important as the decision had been as the days passed it felt like little more than an afterthought. A much greater test was looming just ahead, after all: word had been sent to the Herald, and we were now prepared for the final talks with the envoy of the Kingdom Under. Even the most eminent of swords was a small thing, compared to the conversation that would make or break our attack on Keter.

We took Cordelia's suggested line, at least superficially. The Barrow Sword would sit in as the representative for Below and the First Prince had reached out to the Kingdom Under through the dwarven gate to find an interlocutor should the talks with the Herald fail. We'd kept it deniable and strictly Proceran so far, talking about the trade the gate being dug up might represent while Cordelia's envoys sought to get in touch with an isolationist dignitary. It wasn't that subtle, of course, and wasn't meant to be – our best shot at getting in touch with such a person was them finding us, not the other way around, so rumours were to our advantage.

And if this blew back on us, then the Grand Alliance could say it'd all been the Principate and that Cordelia Hasenbach would abdicate because of this debacle, because she totally hadn't been planning on doing that anyway.

We got tentative feelers back from a dwarf whose title was something like 'home-lord' in dwarven, but she got frustrated when our envoys got noncommittal and that boded well. Knowing our time was running out, we rushed the meeting a day early. The Herald of the Deeps and Seeker Balasi were once again the whole sum of the Kingdom Under's delegation, which in retrospect looked a little suspicious. Arrogant as dwarves were, they had to know that sending fewer people than the number of fucking cities you were asking for was a bit much – this was the Herald's choice, I figured, cutting other people out of the room so word couldn't get out to his opponents back home.

It boded well for our bargaining position that he couldn't even be sure of everyone in his delegation.

"You have been given sufficient time to grasp the terms," Balasi bluntly said. "Have you deliberated your answer?"

They didn't waste time on courtesies and this time Cordelia didn't pull out the perfect hostess routine, which I felt was rather more honest a way to do this. Hanno might be inclined to see the best in the Herald, but I had yet to find any reason to.

"A sort of answer, certainly: it has come to our attention that you have not been negotiating in good faith," Cordelia Hasenbach coldly replied.

I reached for my wakeleaf and began stuffing my pipe, letting the hero and the diplomat have at it. I was here to look imposing and wave my Night stick, not pull strings they were my better at pulling.

"This is an insult," the Herald calmly said. "Withdraw it and apologize or these negotiations are at an end."

Mistake, I thought. The green-eyed dwarf wasn't a diplomat and it showed. Never give that kind of an ultimatum unless you were sure you wouldn't be called on it or you were willing to go through with the threat. The First Prince matched his gaze, unblinking.

"The door is behind you."

Balasi rose to his feet.

"Salia will be sunk into the ground for this," the deed-seeker hissed. "You insult envoys of the King Under-"

**"Silence,"** I Spoke.

His mouth closed shut and he stared at me as if I'd gone mad.

He might think so, but it had been a tactical choice. It meant the Herald would have to speak for himself at all times and I was looking for something else besides. Still, I cocked my head to

the side. That'd resonated more strongly than it should have. It was like I'd thought in Praes, the aspect was so close to emerging it would only need a single halfway solid pivot to solidify. As I considered that I kept my dead eye on the Herald, who under the calm façade was furious. Personally so. *But is it him you're in love with, or is this just a close friendship?* I could not tell, I wasn't good enough at this yet.

There were a lot of revenge stories around the Herald that began by Balasi dying, but that didn't precisely confirm it either. The death of family or a childhood friend was just as common a catalyst as a lover's to begin a journey of revenge.

"Now," Cordelia said, leaning forward, "do you intend to leave?"

I knew her well enough to tell that the glint in her eye was a vicious little twist of satisfaction. Couldn't blame her, given how these two had tried to use the threat of extinction at the hand of a common foe to extort us out of three cities.

"It appears there has been a misunderstanding," the Herald evenly said. "We will depart once it has been resolved and you have understood the depth of your mistake."

"Your intentions were understood," Hanno said. "You are attempting to create realms on the surface where you can change the ways of your people."

It was calculated that he would be the one to speak. If it turned out we'd been wrong in our conclusions, then he could take a step back after Cordelia 'chided' him and remain silent like Ishaq – who was looking faintly amused as he beheld all this and was not inclined in the slightest to get involved. He was a man who knew his limitations, the Barrow Sword. He was still a few years away from having earned a seat at this sort of table in his own right.

"You assume much, angel-child," the Herald replied.

"It is a laudable undertaking," Hanno continued, "but your means are wrong. You cannot build the foundations of a better world by setting the stones on the back of those who live in it."

The Named dwarf's face tightened, the first sign of anger obvious enough I was able to catch it.

"You know nothing, White Knight," the Herald of Deeps said. "Of what is needful or needed. The weight of your ignorance is crushing."

The air in the room thickened, but I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"None of that, now," I lazily said. "Else *I'm* going to start doing it too, and you won't like where that leads."

"Threats and insults," the Herald scorned. "All of you will pay for this insolence."

He stopped massing power, but only because he rose to his feet as well. He strode out of the room, Balasi following after throwing me a glare I rolled my eye at. They two of them left silence in their wake until the Barrow Sword broke it.

"I take it negotiations with these fine fellows are at an end," Ishaq said, stroking his beard.

I cast a look at Cordelia, who looked thoughtful, and then Hanno.

"No," the Sword of Judgment said.

"No," the First Prince agreed. "They will be back."

Two bells later, they were proved right.

—

Dusk was approaching when the two of them returned. They were ushered back into the same room after being made to wait while we gathered up again. This time there were no theatrics: they knew that while they still had a blade at our throat now we had one at theirs. Not the Kingdom Under's, that was a lost cause, but *them* specifically. Cordelia's fondness for cards as a chosen metaphor for diplomacy was proving accurate: we'd played the opponents instead of the cards, and now we were getting results. Interestingly, I noticed that while my command had faded in Basali there was a lingering echo. If I gave the same order, it would come down much more harshly the second time — and my instinct was that three might lead to permanence.

That might prove more than a little useful, if the aspect was meant for what I thought it was.

Hanno took the lead this time, as Cordelia had already pulled the rug out from under them. It was about the soft glove now, not the steel underneath.

"You accused me ignorance," he said. "Help rid me of it."

It shouldn't have worked, I thought. But I knew it would. Because underneath the calm I could see that the Named was just itching to talk. To lay it all out to someone who'd understand, who'd agree. It was the same reason villains gloated, only instead of getting them friends it got them killed.

"The Kingdom Under," the Herald of the Deeps began, "has grown calcified."

He spun us a tale, after that. Reading through the lines and navigating an unfortunate number of words in dwarven that I had no idea how to pronounce, it looked like the heartlands of the Kingdom Under had grown into pretty much a caste system. People lived and died in their little bubbles according to tortured rules, only the rungs on the caste ladder were quite literal here: the commons lived crammed in the deepest pits, the respectable in the nicer cities that had been emptied as the expansions continued.

The Herald was from one of the wealthiest families in the great city that was broadly below Orne, a place called Maradar, but he had seen the evils in the way the commons were used because... there he gave a look to Balasi that put to rest any notion it was just friendship between them. Deed-seekers, as I recalled, were dwarves who sought to commit great deeds to their status would be raised in dwarven society. The pieces fit rather neatly together.

"After I became the Herald," he said, "I attempted reforms. It... did not go well."

"There was war," Balasi frankly said. "He was accused of stepping beyond his Burden."

"So you compromised by heading the Fourteenth Expansion," Hanno said.

Only that too had failed. While the largely bloodless victory I'd delivered to them over the Firstborn had seen the Herald lauded, it had also made the pioneering *safe*. His opponents from back home, seeing massive gains to be made at little risk, had immediately begun getting their hands all over the colonies. To get him out of the way they'd tossed him leadership of the Fifteenth Expansion, an unprecedented honour, but those first waves would be mostly soldiers and those had other loyalties. If he wanted to make a haven for the trod upon, then he would need somewhere else to bring them.

So, as we'd surmised, he'd cut a deal with the same people who had been chasing him off after every victory.

"Securing cities for support would have been so resounding a victory we would have been untouchable for at least a century," the Herald said. "Time to grow, to make alliances."

"A fair turn given to an ugly act," Cordelia said, unimpressed.

"You would already have gone beyond us if you did not want to cut a deal," Balasi replied. "So offer your terms, First Prince."

"Keter," she replied.

"A wasteland infested with the dead," the Herald frowned.

"A great city among once-rich lands," Hanno replied. "An outpost with roads to the Kingdom Under, a natural capital to the Fifteenth Expansion."

"Even if all the dead are broken," Balasi slowly said, "there would be no trade, or humans to work under us."

"Are you seeking change," the Sword of Judgment quietly replied, "or just to add a rung below you on the ladder?"

Both dwarves flinched. There was talk back and forth after that, about boundaries of land and trade concessions and the massive sum of gold that they both wanted – I now suspected to make a garden out of Keter, if they were stuck there – but I could tell that it was Hanno's retort that had done it. Every time it looked like they were getting angry, they felt the bite of the bladelike sentence slide below a rib.

"It is not the bargain I was expected to make," the Herald told us when the negotiations wound down. "I may not have the support to make it law."

"I am willing for Procer to take the debt immediately if supplies for the siege of Keter are promised," Cordelia told him.

"I cannot promise them," the green-eyed dwarf admitted. "I do not have the authority to move such quantities by my word alone. The land-kings will have their say."

"But you can help," Hanno pressed.

"I have struck a bargain with Sve Noc through an envoy before," the Herald said, glancing at me. "This power none can deny me, so these talks do not worry me. All I can offer for the land-kings is an oath on my staff that I will fight for these terms with all my might."

So not a sure thing, I thought with a grimace. It wasn't the agreement we'd wanted, and the Sisters had yet to agree to the terms – which involved them ceding a great deal of territory theoretically theirs – but it was something. And if we tried to go pas them, reach out to their opponents in the Kingdom Under, we ran risks too. The talks might be killed entirely, or the terms grow worse. And even if it worked out just fine, it would take time. What would better terms matter, if they were accepted when we were all dead? No all the decisions we could make carried risks. The real question was which of them was the best risk to take.

My gut said this was the one.



Hanno had gotten to Herald, I'd seen it, and that would work for us. It was a better bet than a complete unknown. I met Cordelia's eyes and nodded my assent.

"Then speak to the land-kings, Herald," the First Prince said. "This is the bargain we seek."

Drinks were brought in, we emptied them and the Herald of the Deeps swore his oath. I saw Creation eddy from the strength of it. *It will not be broken without consequence*, I thought. That night, as I lay in bed I found that sleep eluded me. The assault on Keter had always been going to be a gamble, a roll of the dice that would lead to either victory or extinction, but it was even more so now. We had enough supplies for the march and a few weeks once we set camp around the Crown of the Dead – a little under two months, barring a disaster, but even two months wouldn't be enough to crack open Keter.

If the Herald failed, we failed with him.

I was not surprised that I slept little, and fitfully.

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It was actually quite hard to take anyone by surprise through the Twilight Ways, at least when you got to the scale of armies. A cavalry contingent of a handful of Named could be slipped in to devastating effect, that was true, but an entire army? Getting it through the gates could take more than a day sometimes, not unlike marching a host through a narrow mountain pass, and it was even worse when you were leading a coalition force – half a dozen languages, people yelling about who was in charge and too many different baggage trains. Having led such a force on the Hainaut front for almost two years, I figured I had my finger on the pulse of the kind of troubles it entailed.

As always, though, the League of Free Cities found a way to surprise me. After a day and a half they had most of the Helikean army through and that was pretty much it. Everyone else had landed small forces, squabbling over who should go through, and apparently Bellerophon's citizen militia was debating just staying in the Twilight Ways the whole time.

There would, I was informed, be a vote.

Still, by the afternoon of the second day there was no longer any delaying the official 'arrival' of the League: people had seen the troops crossing into Creation, word was reaching Salia and there might be a panic if the situation was left unattended. The people of Procer's capital had gotten much twitchier about armies since the shine off the myth of the Principate's invincibility had worn off. For that and diplomatic reasons, theatre was made of the whole affair. It suited all parties, since the League

cities wanted to salvage their reputation after sitting out most of the war while Procer was in desperate need of good news to trumpet about.

All of the cities picked two hundred of their shiniest soldiers – Bellerophon drew the names by lot instead – and a parade was welcomed into the city to raucous cheers. Cordelia cracked open the foodstuff reserves to throw street banquets and newly minted Empress Basilia sent out crates of salted fish, dried mutton and dates as an elegant gesture of goodwill. If she made sure that the generosity was traced back to her by having her own officers distribute what was technically League stores, well, that was just how those games were played. She'd not gotten her hat by missing opportunities.

The city's spirits were lifted, the doom just beyond the horizon forgotten for a night, and why *wouldn't* the people cheer? Not even the First Crusade had boasted an array of soldiers from so many parts of Calernia: this time all the nations of the continent stood on the right side of horror.

I did not take long for Basilia Katopodis to seek me out after the formalities were done. She came alone, keeping the pretence of a visit between old friends instead of state affairs, but we both knew better. I received her in the same bar I'd received Nestor Ikaroi in when he came on her behalf, standing behind the counter. The Protector of the League had good taste in drinks: she asked for a Wasteland mule, which was a finger of aragh in pale beer. It was an old Legion favourite I remembered from the War College, beloved of students for being a cheaper drunk than either beer or aragh and of innkeepers for being really easy to cut with water without affecting the taste.

"I wondered if Ikaroi was boasting," Basilia amusedly said as I handed her the mug, "but it seems not."

"It's a little nostalgic," I admitted.

"I wonder if there are any boys in Laure who now boasts of having had their ale poured by a queen," she mused.

I snorted.

"There's a few who could boast of getting more than that, if they put the details together," I told her, wagging my eyebrows suggestively.

She choked on her drink, spraying mist on Cordelia's nice carpets as she coughed. Ah, the costs of diplomacy. The Empress of Aenia, a realm that covered almost half the territory of the League, was a tall brown-haired woman with a rather plain face and the build of someone who'd spent most of their life on horseback wearing heavy armour. No one would call her pretty, but she was fit and

fierce – interesting to the eye the same way a tiger would be. She'd once been believed a man, I'd heard, but I would not have guessed at a glance.

"There *are* tales about Callowan serving girls," the Empress admitted, grinning.

"All lies, except for the ones that are true," I drawled.

She'd not come for idle talk, of course, but I saw worth in keeping the loosely friendly relationship we'd had so far. I had been Basilia's informal patron during her rise in power, providing support from afar while she fought Malicia's allies in the League. I'd even tugged at Cordelia's sleeve once or twice to get her to toss the then-general a bone. We both knew she'd risen far beyond what I had ever intended and that a relation that'd once had a clear superior had grown rather more muddled, but that was not enough to warrant hostility. She was still the closest thing I had to a reliable friend in the League.

I just had to tread more carefully when asking things of her and expect to be asked the odd favour in return.

"That's always the trouble with tales," Basilia said. "It can be hard to pick out the true ones, especially when it comes to Named."

It was my turn to send her an amused glance. There was no need to go fishing when I was ready to just toss her the fish.

"That one's true," I said. "I stand as the Warden now. The office will be written into the Accords, with all accordant powers and responsibilities. There is no longer a need for the League to worry about infighting within the Grand Alliance – all our efforts are turned against Keter."

She let out a low whistle.

"You do keep landing on your feet, don't you?" Basilia said.

"Coming from you, *Empress*," I smiled, "that's a little rich."

We traded toothy, savage smiles.

"The message I sent through Ikaroi still stands," she told me. "The League can't sign onto the Accords unless we get back the Hierarch."

"He did not strike me as a man who would sign them if you did get him back," I frankly replied.

She shrugged.

"Regardless, there's way around it," she said. "The cities have already adopted laws that follow along the same lines, so the holdout is you."

Meaning the office of Warden, which could not be expected to have authority over the Named of the Free Cities when the League had not signed onto the Accords.

"And you have an offer?" I asked.

"What falls under the authority of a Protector of the League is vague," she told me. "Largely on purpose. So Named could be swept under that aegis, if the bone is gnawed at some."

I almost smiled at the audacity.

"You want a deal between the office of Warden and the hereditary title of Protector," I mused. "Your authority over the League's Named recognized in exchange for enforcing the Accords on them."

She wanted for her and her descendants to be the natural and legal lieutenants of the Wardens in the Free Cities. More power gathered to her title in exchange for me getting my way past the labyrinth complexities of negotiating any treaty with the League.

"I could stomach that arrangement," I said, "so long as it's contingent to the League not having signed onto the Accords yet. Once it does, it will be no different from any other signatory."

I might not be in a position to take a hard line at the moment – we needed the Free Cities if we were going to take Keter – I had no intention of sundering the Warden's authority by allowing private Named fiefdoms under the office. Basilia narrowed her eyes at me, recognizing my answer for what it was: a concession that I could accept this temporarily, but that I'd be putting my full weight behind getting the League into the Accords properly the moment we were done with Keter. It wasn't what she'd wanted to hear, but like me she knew that pushing too far would bite her in the ass.

So, as I had expected, she went after another concession.

"They made for interesting reading, your Accords," the Empress said. "Particularly the parts about Cardinal and this school you intend to build there."

I'd originally meant it for Named, but in practice it would likely see only a few of these attending – young and transitional types, before they headed out into the world. The guild I intended to raise there for villains, and perhaps even heroes if Hanno was so inclined, would draw more interest than the halls of learning. But the school itself would draw mages and nobles from all over Calernia, especially if a few Named mages could be

talked into teaching. There would be a lot of influence to be traded there, so I cocked the eyebrow over my dead eye at the empress.

"What about it?" I idly asked.

"The League would be late to join that effort, and our divisions may lead others to edge us out," Basilia evenly said. "A pledge might allay those fears."

I got what she practically wanted out of her before long: guaranteed seats. For students, but also for teachers. And there was the clever part: those were not to be promised to the League itself, since indeed that would be illegal and infringing on the authority of a Hierarch. They were to belong to the Protectors of the League, so that the Empress and her successors could use them for bribes and influence. Well, she didn't lack for audacity. I bargained her down to one teacher and ten students, which I suspected was actually what she'd been after from the start, and with that little concession I got the Empress of Aenia in line.

She'd still fight me tooth and nail to keep the League out of the Accords so she could maintain her authority over Named, but this way she wouldn't actually go to war over the matter. *Good luck with that*, I thought, smiling prettily at her. *The eastern half of the League's terrified of you gobbling them up and it's Cordelia fucking Hasenbach I'll be sending to talk them into signing*. She smiled back just as prettily, no doubt already planning half a dozen ways to brutally smash any fingers that dared creep anywhere near her backyard.

"To alliances," I toasted, raising my cup.

"Long may they last," Basilia Katopodis replied.

And to the sound of metal against metal, the League of Free Cities entered the war.

—

The day before Masego was set to arrive in Salia, the people of the capital filled the streets. Rumours had been swirling around the city for days, no small amount of them seeded by Cordelia's spies, so it was with expectation more than glee that the people gathered. I was not to stand in the crowd but instead in a great raised gallery by the side of the platform where a First Prince would abdicate and another be elected. I'd had forewarning, of course. From the Procerans themselves, but also through the Jacks: the two princesses had gone through every legality they could given the circumstances, and that meant a vote in the Highest Assembly.

There was no way to hide that from Vivienne's people, who might not be the Eyes or the Circle but were nothing to be underestimated.

It was without an invitation that I went to see Rozala Malanza, but these days my name was invitation enough. The guards, swarming the place like vigilant hornets, let me through and an attendant guided me to a small room up two sets of stairs. There the Princess of Aquitan was having a cup of sweet cider as she looked through a great window at the crowd still gathering below. Louis Rohanon, her husband and secretary who'd abdicated rule of Creusens at the Graveyard, was fussing over her as she allowed his attentions with a fond gaze. I was almost reluctant to clear my throat.

Louis stepped back immediately, looking mildly embarrassed.

"Your Excellency," he said. "A pleasant surprise."

"Louis Rohanon," I said. "Or should that be prince consort?"

He smiled ruefully.

"Simply consort," the dark-haired man replied. "After consultation with the Rogue Sorcerer, it was decided it would be best for me to be removed from anything princely."

I hummed in approval. The 'crown' he'd surrendered in Iserre had been more than a chunk of metal, it had been the story of his right to rule. It was perhaps not necessary for him to have refused a largely ceremonial title, but the prudence spoke well of him. Rozala was not without taste.

"And to what do we owe the visit, Warden?" the Princess of Aquitan asked.

I flicked a glance at her husband, who took the hint with good grace and made his excuses. As he left the room I took in the sight of Rozala Malanza as she had chosen to dress for her coronation: a warrior-princess. Over a red dress with a yellow stripe down the centre – her heraldry's colours inverted – she wore a polished breastplate, vambraces on her arms and greaves over soft leather boots. The thick belt at her waist, touched with gold, bore a sheathed sword. The princess' dark curls had been pulled back, freeing bangs as a loose braid went down her back, and she had been made into the very ideal of an Arlesite princess of war.

It suited her, I thought. It was not without reason I considered Rozala the toughest Proceran general I'd faced: if we'd fought the Camps to the finish instead of making a truce, it would have been an army-shattering hour for both sides.

"Now that my husband was chased off and you've looked your fill," Rozala drily said, "will you deign to speak freely?"

I took the time to pick my words carefully.

"Yours is an election come out of the war," I said, "but Gods willing, it will last long past it."

"Ah," the dark-eyed princess smiled. "I had wondered if I would warrant such a visit."

There wasn't a lot of joy in that quirk of the lips.

"You have spent much coin and effort keeping Procer from failing," she said. "So you look for assurances that our gratitude will not be short-lived."

"You took an oath after the Graveyard," I said, "when you put that sword in the ground. I don't believe you the kind of woman to go back on it."

"But," Rozala replied.

"We will have business, you and I, when I sit in Cardinal and you in Salia," I said.

And I did not have the kind of rapport with Rozala Malanza that I did with Cordelia Hasenbach – who, for all that we had faced off for years, had become someone I trusted in our own way. Considering that Procer would be pivotal to the survival of the Accords one way or another, it meant I needed to have a second look at the dark-haired beauty before me: not as Cordelia's general and rival, but instead as a First Princess in her own right. Rozala narrowed her eyes at me.

"Let me speak plainly, then," the princess said. "We will never be friends, Catherine Foundling."

Her jaw clenched.

"I believe you cruel and cavalier with lives as well as deeply conceited," Rozala Malanza harshly said. "That the Gods have seen fit to reward you for this is the misfortune of our age."

I did not blink, waiting for her to finish.

"But you keep your word," the Princess of Aquitan reluctantly added. "And treaties made with you can be trusted. Procer will stand behind the Accords, even if arms must be twisted."

"I have heard promises before," I warned, "and they died stillborn on the floor of the Assembly."

Rozala's face hardened.

"Procer," she said, "will not be what it was. It cannot be."

She rested a hand on her belly.

"I will not bring my daughter into the world I knew as a girl," Rozala Malanza swore. "The chaos, the petty wars and the knives. Hasenbach had the right of that: there is *rot* in the Principate and it must be burned out."

My eye narrowed.

"And what will you do about it?" I asked.

"Open your ears," Rozala said, "after the crown is set on my brow."

I left, as she'd tacitly told me to, and an hour later found myself leaning against the gallery railing while the people of Salia shouted themselves hoarse. After the criers and resonance spells had made known Cordelia's abdication there had been cries of dismay, for though her reign had not been without troubles and riots she was a comfortingly steady hand. They had turned to cheers soon enough, though, when Rozala's election was announced. She was a popular woman, her victories in the north well known while the black marks on her record were long forgotten.

Cordelia Hasenbach herself set the crown of white gold on her successor's head, the two of them matching gazes as she did.

When the First Princess of Procer stepped forward afterwards, to the edge of the platform, I felt spells bloom all around us. Scrying mirrors, I realized after catching sight of one of them from the glint of the sun reflected, though where they led I could not be sure. Rozala had a good speaking voice and the promises she gave out were the kind a beleaguered people could cheer at: driving out the dead, restoring order and peace to Procer. After that, though, things took a turn and I found myself leaning forward in interest.

"- and so as we begin our march on Keter I ask: where are the princes and princesses of the south?"

Murmurs, unease.

"Again and again," Rozala Malanza called out, "we have sown the seeds of our own defeat. Schemes and grasping hands, betrayals and cowardice Shame at every turn.. Even as the Hidden Horror closes his grip on Procer, these *parasites* hide in their palaces and leave the rest of us to burn."

A shiver went through the crowd. Like she'd touched a finger to the pulse of the fury just under the surface.



"No longer," the First Princess said. "I give you this oath now: those who call themselves princes and do not march to save Procer are princes no longer. All their families I attain, all their holdings I declare forfeit. When the moon turns, all who will not hold a sword to save the Principate will be cast out of it until Last Dusk."

The city went wild, the clamour of shouts and stamping feet shaking the walls. And now I knew where those scrying mirrors went: the First Princess had, on the day of her coronation, thrown a gauntlet to every crown in Procer.

*Pick it up, Rozala Malanza had said, or I will drag you off your thrones by the hair.*

"Yeah," I murmured, smiling down at her from the gallery. "You'll do."

—

Hierophant arrived in Salia early, late on the night of the coronation instead of early in the morning. I offered to delay our departure so he could have a night's sleep in a proper bed, but he would have none of it.

"It makes no difference to me," Masego told me. "And time is of the essence, you have been telling me."

"You just want to get your grubby fingers on the godhead of the Crows as quickly as possible," I accused.

"That too," he shamelessly agreed.

He did want to spend a few hours with Indrani before leaving, though, as she wouldn't be coming with us despite her protests to the contrary. I wanted her keeping an eye on the Barrow Sword, whose seat as representative was still too fresh to be anywhere near secure. I encouraged him to, as much because I loved them both as because I needed some time to get the last of my affairs in order. I sent word that I would be leaving tonight instead of tomorrow to all those who needed to know, then talked Vivienne into a late supper with me. Hakram was out of the city, settling a dispute between two clans out east, so a message would have to do.

After my pack and goodbyes were done, I went to find the third companion that would come north with me. Akua was not far, having been amusing herself over the last few days by turning the flying tower where I'd become the Warden into what she called 'a proper throne' in between going into the slums of Salia to offer healing against the diseases that kept sprouting up in the crowded hovels. Some of them could not be wiped out entirely by Light.

"Did you know, darling, that most villains only ever encounter a single godhead in their lives?" she told me. "You are something of an overachiever in that regard."

"It's the Crows again, so it doesn't count as a new one," I argued.

Though it was novel for her to actually need supplies now – as well as clothes, since she could no longer a shade who could change her wardrobe with a thought – she'd had most of them set aside already. If anything, she had seemed eager to head out to Serolen. When I asked, she turned thoughtful.

"I've always felt the business to be unfinished," Akua said. "It is good to settle all of one's affairs properly."

Yeah, I felt it too. It was time to bring to a close the journey that'd begun in the outskirts of the Everdark. We were nearly ready to leave, horses saddled – well, Zombie for me – and our route out of the capital picked out when there was a commotion just out the palace. I looked through the Night, one of my hundred dead eyes, and cocked an eyebrow. Moments later, Cordelia Hasenbach rode in atop one of those sturdy horses the Lycaonese favoured. She had saddlebags and she was dressed to travel.

"Going somewhere?" I idly asked.

"I believe she means to come with us, Catherine," Masego told me.

He sounded a little surprised I hadn't caught on to that. Mercifully, Cordelia was not one of the Woe so she did not take the golden opportunity to mock me as one of them would have.

"I thought it best to make my offer for Keter directly to Sve Noc," the Lycaonese princess said.

She was still Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Hannover, at least for now. The papers to pass on the crowns to Otto Redcrown and turn him into the sole ruler of the Lycaonese were already ready and signed, I'd been told. They were only waiting so it wouldn't look like Rozala was stripping her predecessor of the titles.

"That could be done by scrying mirror," I replied, unimpressed. "The First Princess wants you out of the capital, I take it."

"We are in agreement that my looking over her shoulder as she begins her reign would benefit neither of us," Cordelia replied.

"And how does that lead to your riding with us?" I pressed.

"I thought you might be in favour of my presence," the princess mildly said, "since it will allow you to keep an eye on this."

Reaching inside her cloak, she presented a baton of sculpted ivory. It was beautifully made, but aside from that there was – no, not quite right. There was *something* at the heart of it, I thought, dead eye seeing a glimpse of something like Light. I shot her an inquisitive look.

“It is,” Cordelia Hasenbach told me, “the device that triggers the ealamal.”

I smothered a grimace. Yeah, she had me there. I wasn’t letting that out of my sight if I could help it. I’d already figured there must be an artefact serving the purpose but the Jacks had not unearthed anything when they looked into it.

“I don’t suppose I could talk you into breaking that,” I said.

“No,” she pleasantly replied.

“Welcome to our little band, then,” I sighed.

“It is,” Cordelia victoriously smiled, “my great pleasure.”

## Chapter 42: Journey

*“A journey is one of those magical events that are turned into either an eternity or a heartbeat by the quality of one’s companions.”*

– Aldred Alban of Callow, the Prince Errant

It was pretty clear that Cordelia had not been on a day-long ride in years, but to her honour even as she became pained she did not let out so much as a single complaint. Masego filled in the gap in whining, having always despised horse riding with a vengeance and not grown to like it in the slightest over the years, but of all people Akua came to the rescue.

“My own body is not yet fully accustomed to riding,” she told him. “As I’ve only had it for a few months.”

“It is very nice,” Masego told her, looking her up and down shamelessly.

There’d been about as much sexual tension in that look as in a visit to a healer’s tent to get your boils treated, not that it stopped Cordelia’s eyes from slightly widening. I sighed.

“He’s talking about the homunculus nature of the body,” I whispered at her.

It was made with magic, which made probably would make this the first pair of tits he’d actually be interested in looking at. In

all fairness, if you *had* to pick one pair in all of Creation you could do much worse than Akua Sahelian.

"How sweet of you," Akua replied, not batting an eye. "But it still needs breaking in, which is why I have been using a spell to ease my time in the saddle."

Huh. Hadn't known that. Hadn't felt it either, but that was not entirely a surprise: a mage of Akua's calibre was capable of hiding smaller workings from my senses if they did it on purpose. She offered to teach him the spell and he eagerly agreed, then took pity on Cordelia and offered to cast it for her as well.

"So that you might gauge the difference," Akua smiling offered.

I saw the Prince of Rhenia seriously consider refusing her out of principle, but saddle-sore was saddle-sore. The spell was applied and we quickened our pace again, riding north through the Twilight Ways. It was hard to tell how good a time we were making: from a distance, the starlit compass was vaguer. I could only tell we were progressing, not at what rate. Not yet anyway.

Though the company we'd assembled was unusual – 'the Black Queen, the First Prince, the Hierophant and the Doom of Liesse walk into a bar', there was a premise – the travelling itself was smooth. I sometimes took Zombie on flights ahead, as much to bag some game as to cure her restlessness, and the addition of quail and rabbit to the cookpot was welcome. It was our custom to rotate the chore, which led to occasional bouts of the surreal. Sending the former First Prince of Procer out to gather firewood while the Doom of Liesse made biryani chicken for four felt like some sort of deranged waking dream.

Masego seemed entirely nonplussed, not that I'd expected anything else. I doubted Zeze would bat an eye even if the entire Choir of Judgment made him morning eggs, so long as they weren't over-salted.

Three days in, as Akua went to gather firewood and Masego went about skinning the pair of rabbits I'd caught with a disturbing amount of skill – *much easier than people*, he'd told me with a horrifyingly well-meaning smile when I'd commented on it – I found my eyes following Cordelia's hand. Or, more specifically, the ivory baton they were holding. The command rod for the ealamal. I knew it was real. I'd asked Masego, and there was no fake anyone in her service would have been able to make that'd fool his eye.

"You stare at it whenever it is near my hand," Cordelia said.

"And that surprises you?" I replied. "It's a lot of power bound to a pretty small object."

She settled herself more comfortably against the fallen log, adjusting so it wouldn't dig into her back.

"Not so much more than you could bring to bear, given time to prepare," she said.

I snorted.

"Yeah, no," I told her. "That's not comparable, Hasenbach. Maybe with the Crows personally guiding my hand I could bring down something vaguely in the same league, but it'd kill me for sure."

"You veiled the sun itself in Iserre," Cordelia skeptically replied.

"I mimicked the effect of an eclipse, temporarily, for a small part of Iserre," I corrected. "And that wasn't me waving around a staff, it took months of preparations and an artefact that a once-in-a-century mage made."

I paused.

"And I didn't even do the deed," I noted. "I'm the one who put in the power over the months, sure, but it was Akua and Sve Noc who called down the fake eclipse."

"If you believe that to be reassuring," Cordelia mildly replied, "you are sadly mistaken."

I rolled my eye at her, then put up my palms in a gesture of appeasement.

"Look, at the end of the day we can quibble about precedents and equivalents all we want but you're holding in your hands the control rod to one of the few artefacts in existence that can just kill me," I said. "No ifs or maybes – I'm in the range of the ealamal when you use that thing, and I'm *dead*."

I snapped my fingers.

"Just like that," I said.

I wasn't sure what the boundary conditions for not being killed by the wave of Light even though there'd been tests – it looked like maybe the standards on Judgment deciding to kill you were as low as they could get, but that was just informed guesswork by Roland – yet the odds that I wouldn't be one of those picked off were so low as to be nonexistent: Warden or not, I was still a villain. In some ways I felt like I was a girl again, walking around with the knowledge that my life was only my own so long as no one decided to snatch it.

It'd not missed the feeling, but the years of war against Keter had done wonders for my tolerance to looming doom.

"So you'll have to forgive me the staring," I bluntly said. "It's not going anywhere."

Blue eyes studied me, maybe assessing how much of the agitation in my tone had been genuine. She decided it had been.

"I meant no offence either," Cordelia said.

I shrugged, having taken none. I'd certainly encouraged the perception of my being an unstoppable force over the years, it very much had its uses. But it had led to people overestimating what I could actually do – or survive – sometimes.

"I'll confess to some curiosity as to how you even have it," I said, trailing off.

I wasn't going to push if I hit a wall, but I was more than a little interested. I didn't know Rozala Malanza all that well, but she didn't seem like the kind of woman who just handed out doomsday weapons to recent political opponents.

"It was part of the negotiated terms for my abdication," Cordelia admitted.

Huh. It was true that Cordelia had been in a decent bargaining position when she'd negotiated her abdication. Support for Hanno had been growing, but it'd not been support for him to rule all of Procer and it certainly hadn't been support for Rozala Malanza to do the same instead. After the war would have been a toss-up, there was no telling whether Cordelia would have ended up an untouchable saviour or the woman blamed for the horrors, but at the time of the deal her throne had been solid. She'd lost most of Procer, sure but the parts that had stayed were still largely behind her.

"Didn't quite trust her with the doomsday weapon, huh," I said.

Couldn't entirely blame her. If I'd built something that stupidly dangerous I would want to keep it under my thumb too.

"Trust," Cordelia replied, "can be a very complicated word."

"I'm not casting stones," I shrugged. "If anything I can sympathize."

Cool blue eyes studied me.

"Can you?" she said.

"I've had issues with giving up power even when it was my decision to," I frankly said. "I like to think of those times as growing pains, but it's not quite that clear-cut."

I'd been an ass to Vivienne for some time, when it'd sunk in what my abdication would actually mean. An abdication she'd in no way forced on me, any more than my choice of her as my successor. It wasn't the same with Hasenbach and Rozala Malanza, but there was enough in common I could feel pangs of sympathy.

"Have you considered," Cordelia said, "that perhaps the decision was as much about you as Princess Rozala?"

I blinked at her, taken aback.

"How's that?" I asked.

Her lips quirked mirthlessly.

"You have a history of only listening when the interlocutor also has a knife at your throat, Catherine," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "I took the precaution when I believed I was to be Warden of the West, but I stand by it."

I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to decide whether I should be insulted by that or not. Wasn't sure yet.

"A complicated word, is it?" I mildly said.

"I took oaths," Cordelia simply said. "To you, I do not deny it, but I yet heed older ones. If we lose, if the Dead King triumphs and the land teeters on the brink of extinction, I will make the hard choice."

My jaw tightened.

"If we lost in Keter," I slowly said, "you want to blast the ealamal. As strong as you can."

"More than nine in ten should survive the Light," Cordelia quietly said. "Should nothing go wrong."

"You don't know that it won't," I flatly said. "You've never fired that thing at the kind of strength you're talking about. The furthest you've gone is the borders of Salia."

"I cannot," Cordelia grimly agreed. "Yet what can I do but make that choice anyhow, if the other choice is death for all? Even should nine in ten die instead, it would be better than annihilation."

"And if it goes worse than that," I pressed. "If everyone dies?"

Her lips thinned.

"Then when a ship next crosses the Tyrian Sea, its captain will not find all of Calernia a realm of the dead," the blue-eyed

princess said. "A cold comfort, but then I am Lycaonese: we are winter's get."

I leaned back. I recognized the cast to her face, it was the one she always had whenever I'd brought up the angel corpse over the years. She wasn't going to be moved on this. And I could even see the grim sort of sense in it: like she'd said, even the most horrific of results was a better end than extinction and become soldiers in Keter's service. On the other hand, she had to know that absolutely no one who had a decent chance of dying should that weapon be used – a number including every villain alive – would find this acceptable or be willing to tolerate her keeping the baton should they find out.

I held no illusions about the people who'd been my charges until recently: if the worst came to pass in Keter, they would be legging it through the Twilight Ways towards the closest port where Baalite ships docked. Learning that instead they were going to get an angel knife in the back might genuinely make a few of them desert and I wasn't sure I blamed them. It would not be too hard a thing, I thought, to sweep this under my authority as Warden. Odds were Hanno would back me, and Ishaq doubtlessly would. Hells, I could just *take* the damn thing from her and it wasn't like she had the strength to stop me.

It'd be a lie to say I was not tempted.

Silence hung between us. *It might yet come to force*, I thought, meeting those blue eyes. *You have to know that*. But for all that her holding that ivory length was putting a knife to my throat Cordelia had also extended trust, hadn't she? She'd told me what she intended without being forced, pretty much admitting that she saw her duty to Calernia as something that came before even the oaths she'd sworn to me as Warden. One step forward and one step back, only it didn't feel like we'd stayed still.

A noose was just a knot, until you'd killed someone with it.

"A complicated word," I slowly repeated.

And left it at that.

For now.

—

The journey was restful in some ways, but in others it was not to be. That much became clear as the days passed.

I'd never particularly enjoyed cooking: it was a lot of tedious little chores followed by equally tedious looking over fires and ending up in a plate that never seemed to be quite as good as when made by others. Still, it would be shabby of me not to pull



my weight so I'd learned to be solid with at least few recipes. Of those I liked hunter's stew the best, since it was about as simple as cooking got, and I'd become a fair hand at it. There would be the usual bickering from the gallery about spices when time came to fill the bowls, I had no doubt, but that was part of the draw by now. Indrani sneering down on Callowan tastes and Vivienne going for her throat in retaliation was always good for a laugh.

Hells, back in the day even Akua got into it once or twice. Like most Praesi, she seemed convinced that any plate without a fistful of goddamned cumin sprinkled over it was unforgivingly bland.

I checked on the pot, finding the stew simmering, and stirred it a few times with the ladle before closing it again. I looked through the smoke as Masego sat across from me, long legs folding as he tried and failed to make himself comfortable perched atop a stone much too small for that. I thought of a praying mantis for a moment, looking at the long limbs, and almost laughed. To think he'd been pudgy when we first met. I could hardly even remember what that was like: he'd melted in the months leading up to the Tenth Crusade and never gained back the weight. Long robes and the black eye cloth, a golden glimmer beneath it, were what I saw in my mind's eye when I thought of Masego nowadays.

"Won't be ready for at least another hour," I told him. "So if you were hoping for an early bowl-"

"I was not," Zeze calmly replied. "I came to speak with you."

I narrowed my eye at him. That sounded serious. I wiped the steel ladle on a cloth and set it down.

"I'm listening," I told him.

He didn't speak, at first, as if surprised I'd agreed so easily or unsure what he'd wanted to say.

"We have come a long way since the day we first met in Summerholm," Masego said.

I half-smiled. By some counts, Apprentice could be said to be the first Named to join what was yet to become the Woe. He'd already been a master of his mantle when Hakram had only just begun to come into his.

"You've taken to chasing larger creatures than winged pigs," I drawled.

He quietly laughed.

"Too many still breathe fire," Zeze replied.

He paused, looking for words, and I gave him the space to think. There was rarely any gain to be had in rushing his mind.

"We have all changed," Hierophant finally said, gold shining beneath cloth. "You do not seek the same ends you did back then, and you seek them differently."

"Yeah," I murmured. "I've been seeing that too. We've..."

*Moved on*, I refused to say, because if they were gone from my life what did I have left?

"It is inevitable," Masego said. "The man who raised me is not the same who stood at Uncle Amadeus' side during the Conquest. In overcoming circumstance we grow – or are buried, overcome by it."

"I'd argue they were the same man," I said. "Just standing in two different places, at two different times."

Hardship and pleasure bent people in many ways but ultimately they were just colour on the canvas. They did not, could not define what the work was painted on. To my surprise, he smiled.

"I knew you would disagree," he said. "You still believe in the line in the sand, the difference between right and wrong. I have grown to like that about you, Catherine."

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Have you?" I drily asked.

He nodded.

"You try to make people stay on one side of the line," Masego said. "And, more often than not, we are better off for it. It doesn't always work, but I like that you try."

I cleared my throat, looked away. He'd always been at his most dangerous when he was painfully earnest.

"But you don't believe in that," I said.

"I believed that we should try," Masego honestly said. "You have shown me the value of that. But we've had this conversation once before, years ago. In the end-"

"- Creation ends," I quietly finished. "So it's not wrong to care about it, but it's missing the point. We should be looking beyond the bars, not rearranging the inside of the cell."

He looked pleased.

"So you do remember," Masego said.

"This," I said, "is about apotheosis, isn't it?"

"You have all found purposes," Hierophant said. "Hakram heals the people he once saw as a lost cause, Vivienne has traded the rooftop for the throne, Indrani has decided that instead of being Ranger she wants to be better than her. And you..."

He mulled over his words.

"You have decided to pull down the curtain on the Age of Wonders and usher what comes after with your own two hands," Masego finally said.

"Everyone's changed," I slowly said, "except you. Is that what you're saying?"

"I will break the shackles I was born bearing around my wrists," Hierophant simply said. "I will open my mind to the secret of existence and burn with the truth of the godhead."

I almost shivered. It was a nice evening out, warm with bright starlight and the merry gurgle of a stream right around the bend of the hill. And still I almost shivered, for though there had been no threat in my friend's words neither had there been so much as a speck of doubt. Masego had become the Hierophant by peeking at the truths behind the curtain, laws mortals were not meant to understand, and he had been unwavering in his sole ambition ever since: he would become as a god, and then step beyond even that. I studied him, fingers clenching and unclenching.

"I feel," I finally said, "as though I am being warned."

"The Dead King awaits in Keter," Hierophant evenly said. "And when I face him once more, Catherine, I will even the scales between us."

"You want revenge for your magic," I said.

"Revenge is not the right word," he mused. "It is the bargain of an eye for an eye, and that is not a rule I abide by."

Through the smoke, I saw Masego's eye burn bright gold through the cloth.

"I will ruin him," Hierophant said, his calm like that of a deep, dark lake. "I will make of Autumn's crown a noose around his neck and make him watch as I tear out of him everything of worth."

The fire crackled. Motes of gold danced on the smoke, as if traced by some luminous finger.

"I will use the sum of his works as a step for my own," Hierophant told me, "and let him rot like a bloated carcass as I reach horizons he never so much as glimpsed."

The dark-skinned man leaned forward, long braids sliding off his shoulder.

"That is what I promise Trismegistus King, and only then will I count us even for what passed between us," Masego said.

I swallowed. These were not idle words, I knew. He wasn't the kind of man to speak those. Masego genuinely meant to rip out the power of Neshamah and use it as part of his own apotheosis.

"Why tell me this?" I asked. "Why *now*?"

The glass eye's light ebbed low, now little more than glimmers again.

"You made room for everyone else in the world you're building, Catherine," Masego said, then smiled.

He drew back and just like that there was no trace of the Hierophant left in him, none of the intensity that'd filled the air around likes a physical thing. As if it'd only ever been a trick of the light and the illusion had been broken the moment he moved.

"Remember to make room for me as well," he asked.

I loved the man like a brother, and he loved me the same, but I knew a warning when I heard one. When the moment came for him to even the scales, if I stood in the way it would not be a small thing. That was what he'd been telling me.

If it came down to choosing between my dream and his own, his choice was already made.

—

I'd gotten used to my laundering being done for me.

Both the Army of Callow and the Legions had it as an assigned duty, but I'd never served at a rank where I might end up needing to kneel by the river shore and rub the dirt out of my clothes — or other people's. I wasn't unfamiliar with the chore, it was one of those we traded around when the Woe travelled together. Usually it was Vivienne who traded for it, she didn't mind getting her hands bone cold, but she wasn't along this time. So instead I found myself kneeling in the sand by Akua Sahelian, washing clothes in the stream. It was hard work, and rough on the hands, but there was only so much to wash and when it came to drying afterwards we cheated with magic.

The aftermath found us sitting on flat rocks by the river as we waited on the spell to finish getting the water out of the blankets. Akua had insisted on using a slower one, since apparently it didn't damage the fabric.

"How do you even know that?" I asked. "If you tell me you've ever had to do your own laundry, I'm going to call you're a liar."

She rolled her eyes at me, the simple red and yellow robes she wore somehow managing to look tailored instead of plain.

"It is originally a spell meant to rid oneself out of contact poisons," Akua said. "There's nothing worse than a botched assassination attempt ruining your favourite dress."

"Of course," I drily replied. "How dare I ever think otherwise."

"It is the common birth, I assume," Akua kindly informed me. "I have reliably been informed that lowborn children are born with inferior minds."

I glanced at her.

"Please tell me that's not actually something one of your ancestors believed," I pleaded.

Akua smiled beautifully.

"Not at all, dearest," she said.

A pause.

"It was his Mirembé wife," she told me. "There was a most fascinating treatise on the subject in the family library. Did you know that Callowans are also born naturally subservient? While I'll admit I've yet to encounter such a specimen, very convincing experiments were executed to prove this."

"I'm going to strangle you," I cheerfully told her.

"Irrational anger in the face of one's divinely ordained superior," Akua noted. "I was warned it might happen."

I tossed a stone in her direction, though she got a shield and a smug look up in time. My lips were quirking, though, and so were hers.

"So what's your take on our guest?" I asked her.

She slid me a glance.

"Catherine Foundling," Akua said, "are you soliciting me for *gossip*?"

"Indrani's not there," I complained. "And Masego doesn't get the point. He always tries to be nice."

She was grinning, now.

"She snores like a bear, did you notice?" the golden-eyed sorceress said.

"It was horrifying," I admitted. "I couldn't believe it was her at first, she's always so dainty about everything. I'm impressed at how good she is with a bow, though."

Cordelia had bagged us a pair of rabbits a few days back, which had been a pleasant addition to the cooking pot as well as a surprise.

"Lycaonese nobles are expected to hunt, I believe," Akua said. "Not unlike Praesi, though presumably with fewer assassinations attached."

"In my experience, that's always a safe assumption when Praes is involved," I said.

She snorted at me. It was light talk, nothing of politics or Keter or the many dooms ahead, and it made knots in my shoulders loosen. It was so rare, these days, that I could afford to just sit with someone by a river and talk. We must have spoken for an hour, far longer than the spell needed to finish, but I sensed she was as reluctant as I to acknowledge that and put an end to it. Eventually, though, it became harder to ignore that we would be awaited in camp. I sighed. Her expression immediately went blank, the highborn mask falling down over the lovely face. What had I done? I hesitated, but dimly I could sense that prodding at her now I was likely to lose a finger.

I kept to the silence instead, until humanity bled back into her face and she broke it herself.

"It would be easy," Akua said, "to simply fall into your orbit again. I forget that, every time we are parted."

She smiled at me, fondly but without amusement.

"Somehow I always forget that that it is not some subtle manipulation that you entrapped me with," Akua said. "That you truly enjoy my company, and that is what makes it so very easy for you to win."

"That's not what I'm trying to do," I said.

"It's always what you're trying to do, Catherine," she replied with a strange gentleness. "It's in your bone, the disease you inherited from the father you chose."

My fingers clenched into a fist. That wound was still fresh. I wasn't convinced it could ever be any other way.

"I'm not sure what it is you're saying," I said.

"I have had enough of cages," Akua told me. "And choices being made for me."

"You're talking in circles," I replied.

"If I choose to serve as the jailor of the King of Death," she said, "it will not be at anyone else's behest."

"I've asked nothing," I replied.

It had taken years for me to make it so I wouldn't have to. It had gone wrong in Ater, all the small steps I'd taken. The moment they should have led up to never came to pass. There'd been too much going, and the Bard had put her fingers to the scale. Had the pivot passed, had I failed? Looking at her, seeing her looking at me, I had to consider the possibility that I had.

"Nor should you," Akua said, gracefully rising to her feet. "Of all the debts I owe, the one I owe you is far from the heaviest."

She began to gather the clothes, a clear sign the conversation was finished. And it left me wondering a question I would rather not have to entertain at all.

If I had failed, what then?

—

On our thirteenth night on the road we found the guide Sve Noc had sent us for the latter half of our journey to Serolen, waiting seated by a shallow river. The colours of my sigil painted on its face, Ivah of the Losara offered me a smile as it rose to its feet.

"First Under the Night," Ivah said, bowing low, "it has been too long."

## Chapter 43: Serolen

*"Silent then stood the great city,  
whose mighty had called in vanity  
the great wroth that passed.  
And found they who had laughed  
that their power might be vast,*

*but Dobrogost laughed last."*

– Extract from the 'Dobrogost Veste', a Firstborn traditional epic

"Trouble has come to Serolen," Ivah of the Losara said.

"Has it ever not?" I replied.

We travelled quicker now than we had before. Ivah had bargained for the Secret of the Half Road, and though it might not be as instantaneous as the Shadow Stride the Longstride Cabal had once boasted of it still lengthened our steps. We had to ride in a narrow line, over a stripe of Night barely larger than the horses, but so long as we rode there we were possessed of a great celerity. It did not prevent the horses from getting tired, but they covered easily thrice as much ground before needing a rest. One the second of those interludes, as the rest of our company had their mounts drink in a shallow pond, I sat with Ivah to speak of what awaited us to the north.

"This is true," Ivah acknowledged. "But there have never been troubles such as this. It is... unsettling."

My brow rose. Not a word it would use lightly. Ivah had once been a rylleh in a sigil in good standing, about as high as it was possible to rise without holding the sigil yourself, and in the nights since fought under me through campaigns above and below. The drow was not a sort to unsettle easily.

"Have the lines collapsed?" I bluntly asked.

"We have lost the southern woods," the purple-painted drow said. "The Gloom was pierced through with great roads of steel that were kept alight with strange lanterns."

I grimaced.

"And they didn't pull back the Gloom forty miles to start over?"

Ivah hesitated. It had no reason to watch its words around me. As its sigil-holder, I was the only person it could be said to answer to and I'd never been one to mind blunt honesty. Only there was someone even above me, wasn't there? Sve Noc.

"Shit," I quietly said. "It's not that they didn't want to, they *couldn't*."

It must have been deeply distressing, I thought, for Ivah to admit that the goddesses it had worshipped all its life had limitations. That they were not all-powerful or beyond failing.

"It broke into shards when an attempt was made," Ivah said. "A third was recovered, but Sve Noc says cannot be forged anew into



a lesser Gloom. They have been used as weapons to win battles since."

My eye narrowed.

"You're keeping something back," I stated.

"Mighty Kurosiv has stolen two of the shards," it admitted. "They have claimed it is proof of their divinity and taken the name of Loc Ynan."

*Fate-giver*, it meant. But it was the formal version of giver – maybe closer to 'gifter' – and the implication there was that the gift was given to an inferior. Kurosiv was effectively claiming to be the entity that would 'give' all of the Firstborn their fates. A naked challenge to Sve Noc's authority.

Even this far away from Serolen, I could catch the scent of civil war in the air.

"Last I heard Kurosiv was playing god-king in the northeast, with an eye to returning to the mountains above the Everdark," I said. "What changed?"

"They tell a tale of having wagered the fate of the Firstborn in a verse-game with the Dead King," Ivah scorned. "That they triumphed over it and won from Death a reprieve for nine years. They now come to gift us a new fate, leading us east and across the water to a land of endless riches."

Oh did I not like the sound of that.

"I'm assuming by water they don't mean the Chalice," I said.

The painted drow shook its head.

"The salt-water," Ivah said. "We are to sail on great ships that will bring us to a glorious kingdom without light."

My fingers clenched.

"They made a deal with the Dead King," I bluntly said. "Pull out of the war and the Firstborn get nine years to get the Hells off Calernia while Neshamah thoroughly wipes out the rest of us."

"That is also the belief of Sve Noc," Ivah agreed.

Would the Dead King keep to that deal? I wasn't sure, but in all honesty it shouldn't matter. He'd finish killing us off long before nine years had passed and I had my doubts about the success of a Firstborn exodus across the Tyrian Sea anyway. They'd lived underground as long as they'd been a civilization, they were neither shipwrights nor sailors. *Although with Kurosiv holding the reins, they might just hit one of our port cities and*

*devour enough they can raise a decent fleet.* More worrying was a question I did not have the answer to: was this Kurosiv's plan or was Neshamah now using diplomacy to finish collapsing us?

Because if it was the latter, we were in deep shit. There weren't really any human nations that'd cut a deal with him, at least not unless we suffered a catastrophic defeat in Keter first, but the same was not true of others. The Golden Bloom was unlikely to actively help him, but the elves might take a deal so they could cut and run unhindered. The Gigantes had sit out the war since their sacrifice in keeping the Hellgates closed, so they might be tempted for the right prize, and worse of all was the Kingdom Under. We still hadn't signed a new treaty with the dwarves, so if the Dead King came in with a better offer? Fuck, that could get *bad*.

There was no way we would take Keter without the Kingdom Under supplying the besieging armies. If they pulled out of the war, we were done.

"How bad has it gotten?" I asked, tone gone grim.

It did not play coy, which I appreciated.

"Most of the remaining Ten Generals still follow Sve Noc," Ivah said, "but two have gone over and brought their sigils with them. We still have the greater part of the strength, but that strength is bound holding the lines to the south: Kurosiv and their traitors now hold much of Serolen."

It grimaced.

"The strife has grown along lines it never had before," Ivah said. "The tenets that you taught us in Iserre have divided the Firstborn."

*Fuck*, I thought. I'd never seriously considered that might be a possibility, back when I had spoken out. I was the mouthpiece of living goddesses who held in their grip the source of power of all Firstborn, it wasn't exactly a kind of position that got you *questioned*. But the Sisters weren't the only source of power now, were they? They'd admitted to me months ago that they couldn't even try to kill Kurosiv anymore without pretty much destroying an already-ruined Night and it sounded like the usurper had only grown in strength since.

"How?" I got out.

"Many sigils despise them," Ivah frankly said. "That Mighty can no longer take and kill freely is loathed and the authority of the Losara over the new oaths even more so. Sigil-holders remember times when they were not bound by promises and their authority could not be challenged by vote."

I studied its face.

"It's the protection oath that fucks them, isn't it," I stated.

It was the foundation of the reform I'd laid at the heart of the Firstborn: violence could not be used to keep a drow in a sigil or punish them for leaving it. It was what gave the votes power, why the new ways had teeth. Sigil-holders who continued to treat their followers like cattle would find that their sigils shrunk while those who treated their followers well would find their ranks swelling. A straightforward incentive for sigil-holders to begin treating the powerless decently.

"Nisi and dzulu have been leaving harsh sigils in droves," Ivah agreed. "That this could not be curtailed by spear or Night has left Mighty furious. It goes, they say, against the true Tenets of Night."

"And let me guess," I coldly smiled. "Kurosiv welcomes the malcontents with open arms. They offer the old ways again, maybe even worse."

"It is said that the nisi are sorely used in the territory of the traitors," Ivah hesitantly said. "The tenets of Iserre are not observed among the sigils following the usurper."

And how genuinely awful did treatment have to get, before even the *Firstborn* thought it was too much? And bad as that was, it wasn't even what worried me the most from the situation.

"You told me we have the most sigils," I said, "but Kurosiv poached a large chunk of the Mighty, didn't they?"

Reluctantly, Ivah nodded. I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Of course they had. The tenets I'd introduced gave power to the powerless over the few individuals that'd ruled over more than nine tenths of the Firstborn as uncontested tyrants for more than a millennium. Some of the Mighty would take it in stride, but some of them would simply look at the fact that now *nisi* – a word that literally meant cattle! – had some power over them and be offended to their very core. Lesser Mighty wouldn't mind so much, I decided, because they didn't actually lose a lot in practice and they might even gain in the exchange. But those few whose strength had allowed every right, rylleh and sigil-holders? They would be furious at the reforms.

And now another god had come, one that promised them a return to the old ways. All the most poisonous of the Mighty, those who knew they couldn't cut under the reforms, would hear it a siren song. If we were dealing with humans I'd call it good riddance, but these were drow: being a murderous cancer likely meant they'd been among the strongest of their sigils.

"Fuck," I feelingly said.

That civil war was still looming just beyond the horizon, but worse than that was the realization that my side might actually lose it.

—

It took us another week and a half to get to Serolen, a short span that felt like forever. Every day we spent here could not be spent with the armies that must already be marching on Keter. How much more of the Principate had been destroyed, while we rode down a shadowed road? How many more thousands had died to blades and devils? There's been a restful tinge to the travels at first, since so little was demanded of me save that I ride north, but that had faded. Urgency whipped at my back, reproaching every breath not spent making haste to Duskwood.

The others felt it too. Cordelia grew more somber as the days passed, still cordial but ever more distant, and Masego even began setting aside his book to ride in earnest. Akua, as though the talk by the shore had never taken place, stuck to me as a second shadow. She spoke more to Ivah than myself, asking it about old acquaintances and the state of affairs in the Empire Ever Dark. But her presence was not unpleasant. I tended to withdraw less into myself when there was a conversation going, and it was less demanding to listen than to have to keep it going myself.

It sometimes frightened me how well she had come to know me, perhaps better than anyone alive save Hakram.

We could tell the moment was passed the remnants of the Gloom, even in the Ways. The shadows got deeper, the stars more distant, and Ivahs' road grew noticeably more effective. From there, our last few days were consumed with haste. There was a calamity in the making, I knew it deep in my bone.

"Is it your Name?" Akua asked me quietly, one night by the fire.

"Maybe," I murmured. "More senses than aspect, yeah? It's like I can feel a current with my fingers."

"Fate," the golden-eyed sorceress said. "A convergence of events."

I nodded.

"Something big is coming," I said. "A great pivot."

For my patron goddesses, or for all the Firstborn? It was too early to tell. All I knew was that coming too late would bring down a disaster on all our heads. So we picked up the pace,

running each other ragged as we rode through a dry and sandy riverbed until I could sense the end of our path ahead. Our mounts milled about the sand as I reined in Zombie and the horses followed, Ivah coming to stand at my side without so much as a whisper of warning. Not without reason had I once named it my Lord of Silent Steps.

"We're here," I called out. "Get ready for the crossing."

I got a tired, cranky grunt out of Masego and more vocal acknowledgement from the other two. I barely paid attention, though, catching Ivah's stare from the corner of my eye.

"You told me parts of Serolen are in Kurosiv's hands," I said. "What are the odds that there are enemies waiting on the other side?"

"We will emerge within the Shrine of Tears, Losara Queen," it said. "It is a stronghold of those loyal to Sve Noc."

"So not very," I summed up.

"It is so," Ivah agreed.

I sighed, then glanced back.

"Arm up," I ordered. "We're going into trouble."

Ivah sent me a wounded look, but it ought to know better by now. Even if there hadn't been a bevy of gods at work in Serolen, convergences of fate made the unlikely common. I would have bet on a fight even if there *wasn't* a good change of enemy action. I took the lead, Ivah at my left and Masego behind me. Akua stayed in the back with Cordelia, as much to shield the calm-faced princess as because she tended to benefit from having longer to cast. She wasn't the war mage that Masego had been before he lost his magic, or truthfully even now. I unsheathed my sword, Zombie keening eagerly at the sound, and breathed out.

My staff came down, opening a gate out of the Twilight Ways, and I rode through.

The air was warm and humid, that was my first thought. I blinked it away, but my eye went wide as I took in the sight around me. The Shrine of Tears was massive, larger than any Proceran palace I had ever seen and taller than even the Alban Cathedral in Laure. It was disorienting to stand inside, because the shrine pretended it was otherwise: though there was a tall ceiling of curved stone high above, it was hidden by thick fog all the way to the corners of the roof – which came down in walls that were long curtains of rain.

Through the uneven curtains I glimpsed at the lake the shrine had been raised on, but it was not what drew the eye as I rode further onto a causeway of wet stones. Under the roof the great Shrine a hundred smaller shrines had been built, made of painted tiles in vivid colours: red and yellow and blue. Few were larger than a house and everywhere tall painted poles stood, bound to each other and the sharp roofs of the shrines by thick woven ropes from which hung strands of coloured cloth and shining trinkets.

Across it all rain fell in gentle drops, sliding down the vivid tiles and down deep furrows in the ground that led to shallow canals. It was as if under the great roof a hundred beautiful islands had been laid to rest among rivers of stone, each laden with prayers and offerings. It was, I thought even as I pulled up my hood, a place of startling beauty. Behind me I heard Cordelia gasp and smiled. She'd never known the Firstborn as anything but violent killers and skulking spies, but this should begin to teach her differently. They were the ruin of a people, but even now there was more to them than Night.

We emerged on the island at the heart of it all, on the causeway leading to the ornate shrine behind us while knotted ropes crisscrossed above our heads. And as the gate out of Twilight died with a gentle breath, I saw movement ahead. Silhouettes moving through the faint mist of islands.

"There should be a sigil awaiting us," Ivah said.

Its eyes had followed my own, picking out the number. Seven, eight, nine – no, eight, they were using raider's walk to make their warband look larger than it was.

"Looks like there's one," I coldly smiled.

I shrugged.

"At least it's not one of the Ten Generals," I said.

I would have felt one of them coming. This was, by their strength in the Night – oddly muted to my senses, enough that I couldn't just pick out their numbers through it as I once would have – a sigil-holder and a cadre of rylleh come to kill us.

"What insolence, to dare come to this holy place as servants of a false god," Ivah said.

Its shoulder had tightened, its muscles coiled. All in anticipation of the violence to come.

"Zeze," I called out, "sow confusion."

He cleared his throat.

"Can I have the bodies afterwards?" he politely asked.

I turned to fix him with a steady look.

"I have been very interested in how a race not born to the use of Night could grow so innately adept at wielding it," he defended.

"Fine," I sighed. "Just don't get, you know..."

I gestured vaguely.

"I do not," he admitted.

"Don't get all Warlock about it," I elaborated.

I ignored Akua's choked laugh and Cordelia's murmur of 'should I even ask?'.

"I will not be the Warlock," Masego assured me.

"Not what I asked," I sighed, "but I guess it'll have to do."

I patted Zombie's neck, stroking her feathers and nodded at Ivah. It did not need instructions, not after the months we'd spent fighting together in the Everdark. It knew exactly what I wanted of it. I rolled my shoulder to limber it, then cracked my neck to the side.

"Well," I cheerfully said. "Let's solve us a religious dispute. Chno Sve Noc!"

I spurred Zombie to a gallop, and moments later we were aflight.

—

They shot first.

It was the first time I'd fought Firstborn since the Night was ruined, and the difference was plain to see: the three streaks of darkness that howled towards me took a moment to form and they... weak. The Secret could no longer be used the way it once had been. I didn't even bother to weave a defensive working, my knees guiding Zombie into a short dive that saw all three projectiles go wide. Three of the rylleh ran at me down the causeway on the other side of the river, power blooming around them as they aimed to leap at me when the dive went lowest, but I grinned and pulled deep.

Gods, the Night came easy here. It was so much stronger than in the south.

The air exploded, paving stones flying everywhere as the rylleh scattered into thin lines of Night along the ground, and my staff touched one of those strands of shadow before Zombie banked

upwards. That was all it took. I disrupted the Night before it could form into flesh and the rylleh lost control, reappearing like a burst balloon filled with black blood. It never even got off a scream and I pressed low against Zombie's neck as another volley of Night streaks howled just past my air. Amateurs. If they'd gone for centre of mass instead of my head, they would have at least forced me to defend.

Still, they were not unskilled. While three ran across the causeway and another three continued to fire from the back, the last rylleh had been pulling on a larger working. The kind that took time and shouldn't be interrupted. Coming out of its body in strands of Night, a hulking shape with a massive maw – it was little more than teeth set in a round and eyeless head – formed and shot out towards me. It didn't make it far. Two heartbeats and the world rippled, the rylleh's face turning to utter surprise as the Night beast turned around and bit its head off before blowing up in streaks of black flame.

Hierophant could do all manners of nasty things, using Wrest.

The flames scattered the rylleh shooting projectiles, as they'd been standing too close for comfort, and that was my opening. I slapped aside the spear one of the runners from earlier tried to toss at my back, then sent out my will and picked up the black flames that were guttering out. I fed them life and they roared out in a blaze, spreading in thick tendrils that swallowed up two of the rylleh in the blink of an eye. One of them walked out of his own flesh with a wet squelch as it began to burn, but Hierophant broke the working halfway through and instead of being skin deep half the meat stayed on the bones. Gods but that was an ugly way to die.

Four out of eight dead, all rylleh. Where was the sigil holder, it hadn't made a move yet? Ah, out back. Atop one of the shrines, gathering Night to itself to form some sort of carapace armour. I'd seen Mighty Jindrich do something similar once, but the shape stayed humanoid here. I suspected I'd not enjoy it should the armour be finished. A whisper against the back of my mind and I turned without batting an eye, following the instinct. My staff slapped down a spear, then twirled to parry the spear of Night that had been hidden in its shadow. I'd not moved in moments, and in a fight that was too long.

"Go," I whispered at Zombie, and guided her with my knees.

We fell into a curved glide, circling around the island-shrine where I had caught up to the warband. Two of the surviving rylleh fell back to their sigil holder, but one slipped behind me and leapt across the canal – to be caught in the throat by a bolt of sickly green light. The drow went straight through the spell, looking triumphant, but that passed. The moment its feet touched the stone on the other side, they began to turn to dust. *Someone*



was getting fancy. Akua always did like her curses. I had more pressing matters, though.

I flicked an orb of black flame at the sigil holder gathering his carapace, but the two rylleh besides it formed a spinning wheel of Night and scattered it. Yeah, they were going to keep covering their captain until it got that done. Unfortunately for them, I had a way around that.

"The carapace, Zeze," I shouted.

The world rippled again, and in the heartbeat that followed it all went wrong. I could feel Masego's will wresting away the Night, began to rip out the carapace, but then another will fought him. Not the drow's, it had tried and failed already. Something *bigger*. Hierophant let out a hoarse shout of pain and I clenched my jaw in anger, lashing out with howling flame. Again the rylleh summoned their wheel, but the Night was all askew around them and as my working impacted theirs the fabric of Creation rippled out angrily. I pushed my will, fed my working, and there was loud crack before the shrine burst into a rain of melted, broken tiles.

A plume of smoke hid the results from my sight, but I could still feel Night in there. At least one was still alive. I risked a glanced back, finding Masego was leaning on Akua and bleeding from his empty eye socket. Golden eyes met mine from a distance and she shook her head. In no danger of death, then. Good, I could put my full attention on this. Kurosiv had taken offence to someone wresting Night from their faithful, but it was not the last injury it would suffer today.

When the smoke scattered I found the sigil holder still standing, garbed in black carapace from head to toe. It was segmented, like armour, and it had taken up a long spear of obsidian covered in glyphs. I saw the mark of its sigil written on the side of its carapace helm, a pale wriggling snake pierced by an arrow. *Eterin*, it meant, and so it was Mighty Eterin I now faced. The armour drow leapt up, landing with unearthly grace atop one of the wooden poles. Eterin flourished its spear at me almost mockingly, and my eye narrowed. I guided Zombie's glide to the side, watching the timing and throwing myself off.

I landed atop a pole of my own, leg throbbing with pain, and return the flourish with my sword.

"In the name of Loc Ynan, I order your submission," Mighty Eterin called out.

Its voice was reedy, but its eyes were sharp.

"As First Under the Night, I offer you a chance to return to convert back before your summary execution," I mildly said. "Which I feel is rather generous, considering."

It laughed.

"Va Ynan Yn," Mighty Eterin replied, and broke out in a run.

*The gift is given*, it meant. Eh, ours sounded better. With unnatural grace it ran atop the rope tying our poles together, but I did not move to meet it. I called Night to me instead, weaving it into spinning blades above its head. My eye narrowed as the air current failed to suck Eterin upwards, snapping the working into an explosion instead. That got it to react, but not as I wished: it swayed on the rope for a moment, but the armour was not so much as dented.

"Tricky, tricky," I muttered. "You don't get the mobility, but this is stronger than Jindrich's Secret."

And Jindrich had been the second strongest sigil holder in Great Strycht. It wasn't the expendables I was getting sent at me. I began gathering Night again as Mighty Eterin crossed the last of the distance separating us, laughing as it raised its spear, and grinned back toothily. Tendrils of shadows rose from the bottom of the pole, twining around my limbs, and I focused my Name: with the strength of both behind me I met Eterin's blow, my staff catching the side of the spear.

It should have been blow straight off or lost the spear but instead spun, impossibly still on the rope, and when I tried to slide my sword into its belly the steel slid harmless against the carapace. I hastily put my guard as Eterin finished its spin, turning it into a blow from the back of the spear towards my ribs, and though the angle was wrong for both it was worse for me. My blade went down, the obsidian shaft struck my rib hard and I swallowed a groan. But I was close, and with a free hand. I laid my fingers against its chest and my will *pulled*.

It was easy as ripping a page out of a book. For the first heartbeat, at least, and then I felt it too. The thing that called itself Loc Ynan, Mighty Kurosiv. The great leech that had survived even the wrath of the Crows. It was like the whole sea coming down at me through a narrow channel and I rocked back, shaken, but I saw something beyond my vicious blooming headache. This was a power, but it was not beyond me. Kurosiv was not a god, for all that they put on airs. And I had ended stronger storms than this, crushed them in the palm of my hand.

"I am the Warden, you upstart thing," I hissed, "and if you dare raise your voice against me, I will **Silence** it."

The Night in Mighty Eterin *died*. It was snuffed out like a candle between fingers, Kurosiv's will cut just before I felt from it a towering rage. The sigil-holder moaned out in pain, his carapace crumbling into nothing, and my hand rose to catch its throat.

"You should have picked a better god," I told it, and *squeezed*.

My Name flared, the Beast laughing in my ear, and Mighty Eterin died as I pulped flesh and shattered bone. Urgh, now it was all over my hand. I leapt down, using the tendrils to ease my descent, and dismissed them as my boots touched stone. I tossed the corpse away and wiped my hand on my breastplate, limping away to pick up my sword and sheath it. And as the last of the bodies began to cool, a hush fell upon the Shrine of Tears. A dimness blanketed the world, the sound of my own breath distant to my ears and the soft patter of the rain gone silent. I did not need to look to know they had come, sensing their looming shapes in the Night like leviathans swimming through the water.

They perched behind me atop the tallest shrines, the silhouettes of great crows large as houses casting long shadows past me. Sve Noc had come to the victorious field.

"Now you show up," I drawled, glancing back at my patronesses. "A little late to the evening, are we?"

They were hard to look at with the naked eye, even for me. Their very feathers seemed woven out of inky blackness, and here in this place of power I could dimly sense the endless void that lay beyond the surface. Like the emptiness behind stars, the absence of anything at all. Someone might go mad, looking too deep and too long at that. Ivah was already kneeling, but neither Akua nor Masego – recovered but his face still touched with blood – seemed impressed. They looked at the goddesses with the unruffled assurance of people who had been raised to see gods as meat on the block, not anything worthy of awe.

But that was only to be expected, while Cordelia staying astride her horse had me nodding in approval. It was her first time standing before the likes of Sve Noc, as far as I knew, and though her hands were bone-white around the reins she sat straight-backed in the saddle. There was steel in that spine. The Sisters did not answer me – indeed they rarely spoke outside mind or shared dreams – but there was no need for them to. They had brought a herald with them, an old acquaintance.

The Tomb-maker was still the oldest drow I had ever seen. Its back bent, its skin creased and its thick black veins visible through it. Its tunic of obsidian rings was belted tight at the waist and it wore no arms, never having done so as long as we'd known each other. Silver-blue eyes were set in a face bearing in paint a blooming ochre sunflower in ochre and its long white hair

went down its crooked back. Mighty Rumena had not aged a day since I last stood in its presence.

"Losara Queen," the old drow greeted me. "You have already shed blood on the grounds of Serolen."

"A good omen," I agreed.

"There are few better," Rumena chuckled.

It cast a look around, lingering on distant gates that stood across the shrines.

"My sigil will hold the Shrine of Tears until the Kasedan arrive," the Tomb-maker told me. "Let us leave for the temple-fortress. We stand too close to the skirmish lines for council to go unheard."

"Doing a lot of walking, are you?" I smiled. "I suppose I've already handled the fighting for you."

It smiled at me, glancing at the dead bodies.

"Indeed," Rumena said. "You may now boast strength equal to a rat trap, First Under the Night."

Fuck, no comeback came to mind. Not *again*, goddamnit. Komena cawed in amusement. She always played favourites, the bitch. The Secret of Scathing Retorts remained enthroned.

"Ugh, just take us to the whatever temple," I sneered.

It took to victory with a mocking grin. Masego cleared his throat.

"And send the corpses after us," I added. "The Hierophant has laid claim to them."

If there was one upside to dealing with the Firstborn, it was that no one so much as batted an eye when Zeze asked for a pile of corpses.

Silver linings, eh?

—

Serolen was a city that had been built out of a hundred cities, and there was no other like it on Calernia. The finest monuments and architectural wonders of a nation millennia old had been stolen and regurgitated wherever it pleased Sve Noc, a haphazard nightmare of great beauty. Towers carved out of stalagmites jutted out of the forest floor along with elaborate painted pyramids and what looked like an entire city district on a mile-wide plate of stone. Small houses of stone and wood had risen up

between the great works, streets being burned into the ground with Night along the sprawling canals that Andronike had insisted on.

The temple-fortress was not one of the ornate and beautiful places, but instead exactly what it had been named as: a square of heavy obsidian walls surrounding a squat fortress of stone and bone topped by an airy temple without doors where Sve Noc liked to nest. Our rooms were at the heart of the fortress, deep in the belly behind half a dozen heavily armed sigils. I sent Zombie up to the temple, knowing she'd enjoy the place and the Sisters wouldn't mind, and dropped my affairs in the luxurious rooms that'd been designated as mine before immediately heading for the war council, where Rumena and Mighty Ysengral would be waiting. Ivah had left to attend to the Losara and prepare them for my return, while Akua and Cordelia both indicated interest in attending the council. Masego, not so much.

"I want to dissect the bodies while they're still fresh," Zeze informed me. "My interest lies in the intersection between Night and the physical body, which requires that there still be wisps of it yet to fade."

Well, it wasn't like he was actually going to pay attention if I forced him to come.

"Don't get too deep in a new study," I warned. "We might need to go on war footing soon."

He scowled at me but did not argue. Good enough. I picked up Cordelia and Akua, both of which were drawing stares wherever we went. All three of us were human, but unlike them I could be felt to have power in the Night – with my hood down and no skin showing, I might be taken for a short Firstborn if not for the depths of my strength revealing me as Sve Noc's chosen herald. In a nostalgic turn, the war council room that I found was much like the one I had seen in Great Lotow long ago: thrones set against the walls and an empty stone floor at the heart. Neither Rumena nor Mighty Ysengral were seated when I entered, an implicit mark of respect.

I'd seen Ysengral in dreams before. It was the best defensive commander of the Firstborn in my opinion, only the eighth of the Ten Generals but having proved utterly lethal to Keter's forces by relying heavily on traps and artillery. It had earned the sobriquet 'Cradle of Steel' the hard way. It was no more impressive in person than it had been through the visions, a skinny drow with short white hair and a slight overbite revealing half-broken teeth. It wore black half-plate made of an alloy forged through Night over steel ringmail, and a single-edged sword was sheathed at its hip.

Both it and Rumena offered me a respectful nod as I swept in, Akua and Cordelia behind me.

"Mighty Ysengral," I smiled. "Our meeting is a long-awaited pleasure."

"Shared, Losara Queen," the drow replied. "I ate memories of the campaigns in Hainaut with great pleasure."

A toss-up whether the poor bastard whose memories had been eaten still lived. Just because Ysengral was competent didn't mean it was any less vicious than the rest of the Firstborn when it wanted something.

"I bring with me Prince Cordelia Hasenbach, of the Lycaonese," I told it, "and the one who was once a shade in the Night, Akua Sahelian."

Ysengral flicked a silvery glance at Akua.

"I have heard of your works, Mighty Shade," it nodded.

Cordelia did not rank the same courtesy. If she was offended, she did not show it. It wouldn't be the last insult she swallowed today anyway, as I'd told her. For one neither she nor Akua would get to sit here, as it would imply they were equals to the two Mighty – something neither of them was likely to tolerate even if I interceded. It was easy enough to find which was my throne: one of them was twice as large as the others, about the right height for me and positively dripping with sculpted crows. I sat down with relief and they followed suit. Cordelia came to stand by my right, Akua following suit to my left with an amused quirk of the lips.

"Mighty Ivah told me of the state of Serolen, but the talk seems to have been out of date," I said. "Where do we stand?"

It was Ysengral that fielded the question, flicking a wrist as it called on Night. An illusion that resembled Serolen as seen from above spread across the stone floor. Nails of pale light began to coalesce over much of the eastern half of the city and a chunk of the centre where the canals converged

"The traitor sigils have seized nearly half the city," Ysengral said. "The traitor Ishabog's attempt to seize the heart of the canals was ended by Mighty Rumena, but the traitor Moren has broken the back of two of our own offensives."

Ishabog the Adversary, the Fourth General. One whose sigil was small and made of only the strongest Mighty, numbering not a single nisi and dzulu. Its defection to Kurosiv was not unexpected. Moren Bleakwomb was an even harsher loss, having been the Third General. It knew Secrets that granted it power over ice

and snow, an arsenal that had only grown more deadly after Sve Noc devoured Winter. In a straight fight it was probably weaker than Rumena, but it didn't give straight fights and anybody trying to kill it was going to die in a permanent blizzard long before catching sight of it.

One of its favourite tactics was to use its dzulu and lesser Mighty to bait an enemy sigil onto grounds it could encase in ice, killing both in a stroke, so I could see why Kurosiv's ways would be of greater appeal to it than the reforms.

"And what have they been doing since Ishabog got whipped?" I asked.

"Skirmishes across all boundaries," Rumena said. "They push strongest for the temples in the city heart, but there have been attacks everywhere."

"Moren placed sigils at the border and gave them lead to raid as they wish," Ysengral told me. "Ishabog and its riders join the raids as they pleased, abducting duzu and slaughtering all others."

I frowned.

"So they've stopped with major pushes?" I asked.

"I believe Ishabog is joining raids to find a weakness in our defences," Ysengral said. "It looks for a killing stroke."

I looked at Rumena.

"They are provoking us to attack," Rumena disagreed. "Only I could match Ishabog on the field and it follows no strategy, so they hoped to bait us into another offensive so that we might try to force its presence."

The old drow grimaced.

"It is a trap," the Tomb-maker said, "we have seen that Kurosiv's traitors are raising towers of obsidian in many places across the city."

I did not like the sound of *that* at all.

"Do we know why?" I asked.

"They might be meant to empower Moren's winter," Ysengral suggested. "We have dammed it on their side of the canals with Secrets, but if forced through our defences it could overturn the preparations of my sigil."

"I do not believe it Moren's work," Rumena disagreed. "It has always preferred raw strength to ritual, and Ishabog even more

so. There is only one other mind that can have conceived of such a thing."

Kurosiv themselves. Yeah, the more I heard about that the less I liked it.

"Then we need to have a look at one of those towers," I said. "We need to know what they're for. What kind of defences are we looking at?"

"Significant," Mighty Ysengral replied. "Sigils defend them and sometimes more than one. No less than an offensive will let us reach even the closest."

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Then that's what-"

I felt Andronike brush against my mind, the refusal deep. They did not want us to go on the attack. *Why?* I had fallen silent, turning to look at the temple above us through the ceiling, but no one asked why. The answer my patronesses conveyed was complicated enough it took me some time to decipher. They were afraid the deaths would feed the towers, I got, only the fear was not just in abstract. *You don't believe those towers are about the fighting on the ground, do you? You think they're a weapon forged to kill you.* I mulled over that, biting my lip. I could see where the suspicions came from.

Rumena was convinced they were baiting an attack from us and Ysengral had noted that Ishabog was abducting dzulu when it raided. Were those meant as workers to raise the tower, or sacrifices to feed them? Maybe both. Either way, it hinted that the towers needed people to be on the other side of the canal for them to be of us. An offensive was playing right into that. But doing nothing was not an answer either, we all knew that. The longer we waited the longer the enemy had to advance their plans.

"That's a problem," I admitted. "How would either of you rank the chances of a small cabal making it to one of the towers hidden?"

Neither of the Might looked convinced.

"Moren knows all that tread its winter," Ysengral said.

"There are ways around every power," I said.

"They'll have seer Secrets everywhere around the towers," Rumena replied more bluntly. "Without the cover of an offensive and the chaos of war, there will be no success."

"The deaths of an offensive across the canals might be turned against us," I said. "We will not make such an attempt."



The once-First Prince of Procer stirred at my right. I turned to look at her.

"Cordelia?" I asked. "Speak."

"Am I to understand, Losara Queen, that it is the deaths of our soldiers that are the reason such an attempt cannot be made?"

Eh, maybe not in an absolute sense but in practice yes. Kurosiv might be able to sacrifice its own sigils to try to kill Sve Noc, but it would be a bloody gamble – and if it lost, it would have nothing left. Much better to spread out the deaths between two sides, even them out by making it a war.

"More or less," I agreed.

"Then I may have a way," Cordelia Hasenbach said.

The drow seemed skeptical, but I knew better.

"What do you need?"

"One day," she replied, "and every Firstborn chronicler you can spare."

Well now, I thought, that ought to get interesting.

## Chapter 44: Antecedents

*"If you cannot be good, be just. If you cannot be just, be mindful. If you cannot even be that, then be slain by a better man."*

*– Clément Merovins, fourth First Prince of Procer*

I was too restless to sleep, after the council, and so I sought company instead.

Masego barely slept any more than I did, so it was at the... well, he'd probably call it a laboratory but it was really more a charnel yard that the Firstborn provided him. He was cutting open a rylleh's skull with a silver knife when I entered, from the top of the head to the strange almost beak-like nose bone that drow had where humans had cartilage. While there were more bones there were less muscles on their species' face compared to humans and they were placed differently. It was one of the reasons the drow were considered less expressive.

I dropped into a rough stone seat, watching him work. As a girl I'd found the sight gruesome, but these days I'd made enough corpses that their sight evoked little in me.

"Learned anything useful?"

Hierophant did not immediately answer, waiting until he'd finished cutting through the bone properly and revealed the black sausage-like brain under.

"Useful?" he mused. "I do not know. Yet certainly interesting."

We tended to have somewhat different ideas about what that word meant, but what the Hells. It wasn't like I had anything better to do.

"Like what?" I asked.

He looked surprised, eyeing me suspiciously.

"You do not usually express much interest in my dissections," Masego said.

He sounded, I thought, a tad reproachful.

"It's drow corpses and I am First Under the Night," I shrugged. "You might say it's in my wheelhouse."

He mulled over that, then nodded in agreement.

"What do you know about the nature of the Gift?" he asked me.

I hummed.

"I read the *Natura Virtutis* by Warlock Shatha," I said. "The ability to do magic has two components: one his physical, the body must be born with the talent, while the second is metaphysical and necessitates a soul."

"Shatha's work is incomplete, never explaining how the likes of devils and fae can use a form of sorcery," Masego noted. "I would recommend you read Magister Cressida's *Theologos*, which skillfully revises and completes the theory. Still, it serves as a base."

He paused.

"The metaphysical aspect is the most essential of the two," Masego said. "It is why Akua was able to practice magic after seizing a new body while it would be pointless of me to attempt the same: the Saint of Sword severed the part of my soul that interconnects with the physical, allowing the use of magic. Changing the body would mean nothing."

"I'm following so far," I said. "How does that lead to the Firstborn?"

He tapped the side of his knife on the open drow brains.

"There have been Firstborn mages in the past," Masego said. "We know this as a fact. So why none since the creation of Night?"

I hummed. That was a pretty good question, actually.

"Did the Sisters kill the capacity?" I asked.

"It would be more apt to say that they replaced it," Hierophant said. "As far as I can tell, the same part of the soul that was cut in me – that allows the use of magic – is used for the manipulation of Night."

"Every drow uses Night, to some extent," I pointed out. "They can't *all* be capable of magic."

He beamed at me.

"My wonder exact," Masego said. "I can think of only two existing manner of creatures that can all use a manner of sorcery, fae and devils. Species whose sentience is a complex matter."

Considering fae were living stories and devils grew more intelligent the older they got, on top of both having a sort of immortality, I could see his point. The Firstborn weren't really like either.

"Every Firstborn is born with *some* Night, supposedly," I mused. "It's only those Mighty that have been alive since its creation that lived without it."

And there were precious few of those. Not even all of the Ten Generals had been born before the fall of the Empire Ever Dark.

"That is because your patronesses have changed the souls of the drow," Masego said, sounding impressed by the Crows for what might be the first time.

I felt their weight of their attention suddenly in the back of my mind, the two of them listening through my ears. Masego's golden eye lingered on me, and I wondered if he could see them. I wouldn't be surprised. Either way it didn't stop him.

"It is very crude work," Hierophant opined. "Metaphysically speaking, it is the equivalent of hammering a nail through the forehead to serve as a connection. In those born capable of magic – as one of the rylleh you provided me was – it appears to destroy that capacity."

Komena felt irritated, I could tell because the emotion was strong, but underneath that cover I could sense that Andronike was *worried*. Gods. How many people in all their years had ever found this out? It couldn't be many.

"In those born *without* it, however," he continued, "it appears to serve as a prosthetic of sorts. An appendage that functions as the connection between soul and body they do not have."

My eye narrowed.

"Let me guess," I said. "That nail, it's the piece of Night that every Firstborn is born with."

"More likely there is additional Night as well, gifted by Sve Noc through the nail so that its functionality is confirmed," Masego said. "I imagine that when Night 'fades' after a death, it is returned to your patronesses through that very appendage – destroying itself in the process."

He leaned forward over the corpse-covered table.

"Did I miss anything?" Hierophant coldly smiled, asking the goddesses lurking in my soul.

They went away, silent, and he chuckled.

"I didn't think so," Masego said.

I rolled my eye at him.

"Always glad to see you making friends," I chided.

"I admire the inventiveness of their original work, do not misunderstand me," he said. "It is their ramshackle attempt at apotheosis that offends. Unlike you, who stumbled to the result accidentally, they have no excuse for their sloppiness."

Nice of him to excuse me, but I couldn't actually argue with the way he'd put it so I did not risk sarcasm.

"It was a desperate decision made to save their people, Zeze," I reminded him. "Not a master plan."

"I will not laud a hollow doll as a god, Catherine," Masego shrugged. "If they claimed themselves to be less I would keep silent, but so long as they claim divinity I will offer the very scorn that claim deserves."

Yeah, I did not foresee a great friendship between Zeze and the Crows. A civil tongue was probably the best I could hope for, to be honest, so best to change the subject before they started listening in again.

"So, do you think Kurosiv made their own nails?" I asked.

That got his interest.

"I do not think they can," Hierophant admitted.

"Huh," I said. "How's that?"

"The 'miracle' of Night that creates these nails, Catherine, is not something any of the Mighty could do," he told me. "We came here, you might remember, for the original Night. The power that was bestowed onto Sve Noc by the Gods Below and makes up the heart of their godhead."

"You think the nails are made of that," I guessed.

He nodded.

"Kurosiv is bestowed and not bestower," Masego said. "They cannot create nails because only the original Night can shape souls."

"So they're just usurping where the nails go," I mused. "Taking over part of the spider web, so to speak."

"You forget," Hierophant said, "that the nails are part of Sve Noc. It is more accurate to say that Kurosiv is attempting to devour their godhead one piece at a time, that they might become a god in the place of the Sisters."

I clenched my fingers. Like a tug of war that only ended when one side held all the rope and strangled the enemy with it.

"It's to the death, then," I said.

Masego looked at me, eye glimmering gold.

"Oh yes," he smiled. "Very much to the death."

Well, wouldn't that make for sweet dreams.

—

I was up before dawn, breaking my fast when Cordelia was brought to me by an ispe of the Losara. My sigil had smoothly slid into the role of my attendants and escorts since my arrival, treating me as if I had never left, and it would be a lie to say that I did not enjoy it. The former First Prince sat across the low table, eyeing the spread of food laid out for us.

"Don't eat the mushrooms," I told her. "They make humans laugh uncontrollably whenever we drink water."

The blonde princess looked appalled.

"You have a plate full of them," Cordelia said.

"I can burn out the effect," I said, "and they are tasty as *Hells*."

I popped another one in my mouth, chewing on the savoury flesh. I could eat all sorts of terrible stuff again now that I could use my Name to burn out 'poison' again, it was pretty great. She stuck to the bread and what she probably assumed to be honey and not the blood of gem-eating snake crystallized and then melted into a brew. Tasted pretty similar, though, so might be best not to break it to her. We polished off our food and then got to business, Ivah arriving at the precise moment I needed of it. It bowed and sat at Cordelia's side under her curious gaze.

"Ivah is my second among the Losara," I said. "And it speaks fluent Chantant and Lower Miezán, as you know, so it'll be your guide and translator. The highest Mighty usually speak a few human languages, but those historians you asked for won't."

It would also be her escort, since Cordelia was full of knowledge and eminently killable. Having the effective head of the Losara at her side would clear she wasn't to get her throat cut so some jawor could learn to speak Reitz.

"You have gathered them, then," Cordelia said.

"I have," I replied. "Though there's no such thing as a Firstborn historian in the sense you mean. There are Mighty, though, who through Secrets or because of personal interests have gathered histories of their people both ancient and recent."

"That is what I need," she nodded. "May I call on your war council for information as to the enemy's situation across the river?"

I nodded, seeing no issue.

"Ivah will handle it," I said. "Practically speaking, you can ask for pretty much anything you need."

I offered her a sharp smile.

"One might say your work is divinely blessed."

She looked rather torn at that. Sve Noc were horrors, hard to get around that, but it was useful to have gods in one's corner.

"I look forward to working with you, then, Ivah of the Losara," Cordelia said, offering it a nod.

"And I you," Ivah replied, perhaps more politely than honestly.

Eh, it'd work out. Ivah would prefer to go wade in the blood of our enemies at my side, sure, but its skills were better employed elsewhere at the moment. Besides, if I was reading the Sisters right it would be good for it to have a history of working with Proceran royalty. My tenure as First Under the Night would end before long and my replacement would need to deal with humans

whether they liked it or not. I took my leave from them, having something like an appointment to head to. It had been long since I last communed with my patronesses, and I'd yet to have a proper look at the temple where they roosted. N my way to the aerie, though, I came across an unexpected sight.

Akua was leaning against a windowsill in one of the high corridors overlooking the ramparts, hair loose and eyes distant. My limping gait was easy enough to recognize but she did not turn when I approach, eyes staying on the distant shapes of the great monuments the Sisters had stolen from their ruin of an empire to adorn their capital with. Not unlike, I thought, magpies making a nest. I came to stand by her, leaning on my staff instead of the stone.

"Copper for your thoughts?" I offered.

She did not answer immediately, tucking back an errant strand behind her ear. Her red riding dress was form-fitting, but I followed her gaze instead of letting mine linger. She did not seem in that kind of a mood in the slightest.

"I was thinking," Akua said, "of Praes."

I hummed.

"What of it?"

Her jaw tightened.

"I killed it, you know," Akua said. "The Dread Empire. It might be your father that handed me the match, Catherine, but he couldn't have done it in my place. It was my decision. I saw..."

She shook her head.

"Too much, I suppose," Akua said. "Too much I could no longer ignore."

I did not interject.

"And so I burned an empire I could have ruled," the golden-eyed sorceress said.

I leaned against my staff of dead yew, letting it bear my weight and carefully not looking at her.

"Do you regret it?" I asked.

A long moment of silence.

"Yes," she finally said.

My heart clenched. A golden gaze turned to me, darkly amused.

"There is no need for anguish, dearest," Akua said. "You did not fail. It is not the throne I regret but what it might have meant."

"And what's that?" I warily asked.

"Making a difference," she said. "I could have made things better, Catherine. Mended wounds."

She shrugged.

"Here, at your side again, I am not that woman," she said. "I trail in your wake. Not unpleasantly so, but when I remember those who looked at me with hope in their eyes it does not seem enough."

I studied her, silently, from the corner of my eye. She looked at the horizon still.

"So what is it you want?" I asked, too casually.

She rose from the windowsill, all fluid grace, and offered me a lovely smile.

"I do not know," Akua said. "But is it closer to the woman that struck the match than the one who stood silent in the war council last night."

She left, brushing her hand against my arm as she passed, and I said nothing. I thought, standing there as she left, of that moment when you flip a coin. After it reaches the apex and begins to come down, just before it hits your palm.

Just before you know what face will come up.

—

I called Zombie to me instead of taking the stairs all the way to the summit of the temple-fortress.

It didn't end up mattering, because before I could reach my patronesses they reached me. The touch of the Sisters against my mind was light, but the images they offered up burned bright: I was needed elsewhere. The enemy had come, and I pulled at Zombie's reins as our destination changed. Yesterday, we'd won a victory at the Shrine of Tears and I'd personally slapped Kurosiv in the place. It looked like the Fate-Giver was a sore loser, because the Shrine was where it was picking a fight today. And while I'd been expecting Ishabog the Adversary, the opposition's designated raider, to make an appearance what I got was altogether worse: Moren Bleakwomb had come out to play, and the Third General was in no mood for half-measures.



What had been sheets of rain yesterday was now frozen solid, holes smashed through where the raiders attacked. Mighty Kasedan and its sigil had been assigned to hold the Shrine after we retook it, but I could feel not a single survivor of the Kasedan within. All the Firstborn that remained were of that Other Night, the one I could not read as deeply. Besides, I only had need of eyes to be able to tell there would be no survivors: a blizzard was howling behind the ice walls, the mark of Moren Bleakwomb letting loose. It was not the Losara that I led into battle, as it was no longer their role: they were oathkeepers and priests now, no longer warrior-Mighty.

Instead it was the Rumena at my back and the Tomb-maker itself at my side. Standing before one of the holes, I watched the blizzard and cocked my head.

"That's stronger than I was led to expect," I noted. "In sheer power, Bleakwomb's a notch above even you."

General Rumena did not disagree, which spoke volumes.

"Moren has grown in strength," the Tomb-maker evenly said. "More than it should have. This was not taken from another Mighty. It was *given*."

The scorn in the word was thick. The worthy rose, the worthy took: they were not handed gifts. So Kurosiv had begun to strengthen their lieutenant, huh. I supposed there was nothing keeping them bound to play by Sve Noc's rules anymore.

"How does it compare to Radigast?" I asked.

"Close," Rumena somberly said.

I let out a low whistle. Radigast the Guest, the First General, was powerful enough that even when it possessed the bodies of other Firstborn – the Secret that saw it earn its sobriquet – it could usually bat other Generals around. It and the Gloom-shards was pretty much the reason southern Serolen had yet to turn into a rout, since its sigil was spread out all over and so it could move from one battle to another in the bat of an eye. I rolled my shoulder.

"Well, Rumena," I said, "let's knock before we enter. It's only polite."

I pulled down my hood as the Tomb-maker took a wary step away from me, breathing in and sinking deep in the Night. Blackflame was nothing to sneer at, when you concentrated it, and I'd long learned that trick. I smashed the sheet of ice before us, the sea of black fire I slammed into it sublimating the frozen water and the gust of air making the blizzard within disperse for a moment. Near the gate, anyway. I flicked a glance at Rumena.

"Don't dawdle," I chided. "We've a traitor to discipline."

I stepped into the howling winds, immediately feeling the cold eating at my flesh. Night flared in my veins, burning it away, but I was still reluctantly impressed. That'd been quick. A hundred eyes bloomed to replace my dead one, all buried in wind and snow, but I was feeling out the currents. There was an eye to the storm, a place without wind or frost. Moren and its sigil were there, not in this lethal storm. Behind me I felt Rumena's presence burn in the Night, the ground moving as it raised out of solid stone a path for its sigil to take. Good, that took care of that. I could go straight for Bleakwomb.

It must have thought much the same, because even as I began weaving a bubble of Night against me – a sphere of stillness that would kill the winds – I felt the great presence in the Other Night move towards me. The winds picked up in strength, ice began to spread over the snow and reach for my boots.

"None of that," I sharply said, smashing down the butt of my staff.

Tongues of fire shot out against the ground, revealing bare stone again, and I finished that bubble of stillness just in time for Moren to strike its first blow: high above us, I began to hear *cracks*.

"You fucking loon," I said, half-admiring. "You're bringing down the ceiling on us, aren't you?"

Only it was worse than that. Wasting no time, I pulled at Night and filled my bubble of stillness with spinning winds – not as strong as Moren's, but strong enough to turn aside anything falling on me. Only it'd not just been me that Bleakwomb was aiming at. When it'd brought down the ceiling, it'd filled a massive storm with *hundreds of large pieces of stone*. Rumena's hall was ripped apart in moments and I cursed, ordering it to withdraw in the Night. This wasn't a fight, it was a fucking rat trap – and this time we were the rats. The Tomb-maker balked. Its sigil should retreat, it agreed, but itself... We both paused when a dreamlike vision shivered through our minds.

Andronike's hand, but the memory had been taken by Komena: a lookout from the Ysengral had just seen Mighty Ishabog and its sigil moving to cut our retreat.

"Go," I snarled at Rumena through the Night. "Clear them out."

There was no argument this time. I turned my attention back to Moren Bleakwomb, whose gaze I could feel on me through the storms. I could see through its own works, I thought. So that was why even though it was far from a brawler it'd made it up to Third General: it always had the advantage of home territory,

because it brought the territory with it. Unless I dispersed that blizzard I was fighting uphill and dispersing that thing would blow through most of my strength in the Night. Attrition and aggression with the same single Secret. We'd underestimated our opponent, I thought. Not expected that Kurosiv would empower its lieutenant.

I was not prepared to win this fight.

"Still," I told the blizzard, "there's appearances to maintain. You can't just stroll in, wipe out a sigil and then stay put in a temple that used to be ours. That'd be bad for morale."

I moved around my footing, placed a second hand on my staff and squared my shoulders. I smiled, Night flooding through my veins. Fighting Moren's Secret would just exhaust me, so I did the very opposite. I attuned my Night to its own and fed the working, filled its belly to bursting until the winds howled so loudly that the scream shook the very walls and the pillars holding up the roof began to crack. Ropes snapped, painted shrines shattered and even the frozen waters were ripped out of the canals. I could feel Moren struggle to keep control of the over-mighty working.

"Yeah, you're recent to that kind of power aren't you?" I smiled. "You're not real good at handling it yet, not after so many centuries of stagnating around the same strength."

Then I'd added my own strength and that had made it *significantly* worse. I'd thought it would. I was no stranger to biting off more than I could chew, so I had a grip on the difficulties involved in your strength increasing so suddenly. The two of us stood in the storm, untouched, as the world broke around us. To my displeasure Moren had control enough to spare its own sigil, maintain the eye of calm, but that was all it could save. The Shrine of Tears *broke*, everything shattered and ripped apart until no two stones stood atop one another and the beautiful place I had seen yesterday was but a dream.

The winds died, leaving only a flat empty expanse of snow and a ring of rubble around us. I met the eyes of the silhouette across the field, Maren Bleakwomb's staring back unblinking. A tall and skeletally thin drow, haggard in their stringy blue and green clothes – looking half-drowned – and covered in masses of round beads as if attempting to make up for the severity of its figure. I offered the traitor-general a mocking bow, gesturing at the nothingness around us.

"It's all yours," I said.

The Mighty did not answer. I limped away, feeling its gaze biting at my back.

We both knew this was not going to be our last fight.

—

It was nightfall by the time the borders were secure again and I'd spent most the day fighting.

But a day had been spent, and so I went to reap the harvest that had been sown. I found Cordelia Hasenbach in what had been someone's bedchamber but was not covered in papers and tables, the blonde princess animatedly speaking with Ivah and the two dozen other Firstborn on the room as a dzulu of the Losara took notes on what looked like a great map. I squinted at it as I entered, finding mostly sigil names and red lines linking them to other names. The drow bowed as I entered, which I dismissed, and I turned towards Cordelia.

"What am I looking at?" I asked.

"I am pleased to see you as well, Your Majesty," she mildly replied.

"I'm about six hours and nine hundred corpses past courtesies right now," I tiredly replied. "What am I looking at, Hasenbach?"

"War," Ivah replied in her stead, sounding enthused.

I took a longer look at the map, then scanned the papers. Most of it was poetry, records of duels between Mighty and the found of sig- oh, oh.

"Kurosiv's entire philosophy is being hands off," I slowly said. "It's said multiple times that Sve Noc's edict ending fighting between sigils under Keter breaks is a betrayal of the Tenets. So even if its sigils start attacking each other instead of us..."

"It will not intervene," Cordelia said. "At least not immediately."

"So you figured out which of those sigils hated each other in the Everdark," I said. "The feuds and wars."

"Of which there were many," the princess drily said. "And to think I once believes Alamans quarrelsome."

"The worthy take," Ivah agreed.

"If they're fighting each other instead of looking at us, we have a decent shot at getting to one of the towers," I smiled. "That is a solution."

Then I threw her a look.

"If you can get those sigils fighting," I added. "How do you intend to do that?"

"Last night," Cordelia said, "I inferred from context that though some of the greatest Mighty have abilities to detect intruders this is not perfect. That these 'seers' are concentrated around the towers."

I narrowed my eye.

"False attacks," I said. "You want us to paint raiders in other sigil's colours and spill blood so the feuds start up again."

"They are not so different as princes, these sigil-holders," Cordelia quietly said. "And Malicia once taught me the truth of them: they *want* to fight. All they need is the means and an excuse."

The latter of which we would provide. My gaze turned to Ivah.

"Lord of Silent Steps," I said, "your opinion. Does this have the shape of victory to you?"

It mulled over its words before answering.

"There will be war," Ivah said. "I know not how much, but that there will be war I believe."

I slowly nodded.

"Then let's do it," I ordered.

—

By nightfall the following day, forty-seven sigils under Kurosiv were openly at war with one another and I'd had to refuse eight requests to add Cordelia Hasenbach to the Night.

She'd bought us our shot with her cleverness, now all that was left was to take it.

—

I was out of practice sneaking around without using Night.

Probably should start practicing that again. I'd never been so much as a shade of what Vivienne could do in her prime as a Thief, but for a Squire I'd been pretty decent at getting the drop on people. With the years and the bad leg, though, it'd become more practical to just veil myself and limp right past watchers. That wasn't a possibility tonight: if someone as powerful in the Night as I was started using it on Kurosiv's side of the canals, they were sure to notice. The Sisters had been pretty firm about that. An argument could be made that it might be best if I didn't come along, but my answer had been blunt.

Akua and Masego could probably handle any Firstborn that were not one of the Ten Generals, but that was in a duel. If they got caught and swarmed by a dozen sigil-holders, they were good as dead: Zeze could only Wrest the power one person at a time and Akua's magic was no Night-proof. Someone was going to have a trick that'd get through her shields, and she just couldn't compete with the mobility that any Mighty worth their salt brought to the table. No, if this went bad – and in my experience, little jaunts like this tended to – they would need me to slap the opposition in the face hard enough it bought time for us to leg it.

Some people thought there was more to it, of course.

"I see you cannot suffer the thought of our going on an adventure without you, dearest," Akua amusedly. "How charmingly transparent."

Masego looked at her in surprise.

"I thought it was impolite to point out when she did that," he said.

"Less so when it is done flirtatiously," Akua informed him.

I saw unfoldingly nakedly on Masego's face the struggle between the thought of being able to be ruder to be people and having to be flirtatious. He sighed, turning to look at me.

"Not worth it," he said.

"Hey," I weakly replied, unsure whether I ought to be offended or not.

It was not an entirely inauspicious beginning, considering that a great many of the Woe's successes had been preceded by my so-called friends ragging on me. I supposed that, mathematically speaking, they would have to be.

The half of Serolen our side held was wound up tighter than a coiled spring, but so far the violence had been mostly contained to Kurosiv's sigils with only a few raids attempted over the canals. They'd run into Mighty Ysengral's prepared defences and been brutally slaughtered to the last, which had rather discouraged repeat attempts. Well, that and the baskets full of severed heads the Ysengral had catapulted back over the canal as a taunt. The Cradle of Steel's sigil had knack for the unnecessarily vicious that never failed to amuse.

After speaking with Rumena, we'd picked the tower that had been raised inside the Relic Grove as the one to hit. It was in the northeast of Serolen, past two sigils that had a reputation as nasty customers – the bigger of the two, the Yeshala, had been

the effective rulers of one of the Everdark's cities before the exodus – and deep in a part of the city widely considered a death trap. The Relic Grove had taken a little too well to the surface, the way I heard it.

"The Rozhan tended to the Grove as their sacred duty once and now lend assistance to the cabal protecting the tower," Rumena said, "but they have been drawn into the war between the Yeshala and the Orobog. Patrols will be thinned."

Which would mean nothing if either Moren or Ishabog went prowling around looking for us, but we had a plan for that: Mighty Rumena was going raiding. In principle, the target was a camp near the Singing Rings where dzulu taken from us in raids were being kept penned up.

"How likely are you to draw both?" I asked.

Rumena hacked out a laugh.

"I ripped out Ishabog's ear a sennight ago," the Tomb-maker replied. "It will come for my head if the opportunity arises, I am sure of it, and Moren will act the moment I get too close to the tower in Rings."

I grunted, not entirely convinced but knowing it was our best shot. The Relic Grove wasn't the easiest target by a long shot, we'd been careful not to be too easy to predict in case someone on the other side figured us out, but I disliked plans that relied too much on enemy error. *But we're not exactly swimming in other courses, are we?* The civil war that Cordelia had effectively started in Kurosiv's camp would not last forever: the leech might preach that it let its sigils do as they wished, but they would definitely step in if the fighting lasted too long. They couldn't afford to erode their military strength by too much, not with the balance of power in Serolen so narrow.

"Try to get the other ear," I told Rumena. "I want a matching set for my hat when we'll have talks with their lot."

It blinked, then let out a startled bark of laughter.

"Your will be done, First Under the Night," the Tomb-maker replied.

Funny how it only ever called me that when I was telling it to do violence, wasn't it? Firstborn, what could you do. The timing was carefully arranged so that the three of us got to the canal before Rumena's raid began, looking over the placid waters at the low hills where the Yeshala had lain their line of defence. Most drow disdained fortifications – which I could understand, given what most Mighty could do to a set of field fortifications in the span of a breath – but the Yeshala Sigil had made an effort,

perhaps spurred on by the example of the Ysengral on our side of the canal.

There was a rough spiked wooden palisade set atop a low earthen wall at the bottom of the hills, maybe ten feet away from their end of the canal, and a dozen raised stones reaching higher than the spikes dotting the length of the fortification. Mighty were perched atop the stones, keeping watch on the sigil guarding our shore, and they would be the first obstacle in our way. Akua, standing by my side, had her eyes on the enemy sentinels.

"Strength?" she asked.

"Pravnat," I said. "Maybe one jawor? Hard to tell without them pulling on Night."

Pravnat were just promising ispe, the lowest of the Mighty, and jawor squarely a middle rank among that same distinguished number. I would have expected at least one rylleh around to keep an eye on things, but there was none I could see or sense. Either the Yeshala had committed to the hilt to their war with the Orobog, or the sigil's defence strategy considered these watchers an expendable alarm. Given the usual callousness of Firstborn strategists, it really could go either way.

"Favourable terms," Akua murmured.

I nodded, silently appreciating she'd refrained from calling it luck. Two villains and the Doom of Liesse talking about getting lucky was just asking for fate to rap our knuckles.

"Hierophant," I said, "get us started."

Masego nodded, wresting away the magic in the trinkets he'd taken to carrying everywhere since losing his magic. We'd found that his doing that was harder to sense for Mighty than a mage casting the traditional way, since it was a manipulation of already extant power instead of something forming, so it would be him that wove the enchantment around us. He murmured for some time in the mage tongue, Summer-lit eye sweeping over our forms from under the cloth, and after he snapped his wrist I felt a sensation like warm mist sweep up from my toes to the crown of my head.

"Ibrahim's Mirror," Akua murmured. "Your appreciation for the classics never fails to charm, Hierophant."

"It's a fine spell," Masego told her. "Even Father couldn't find a way to improve the formula."

The conversation was a little surreal to hear, considering that I could now no longer see either of the people speaking. It wasn't true invisibility, which was rare and exceedingly difficult to



maintain, but instead a sort of reactive illusion forming a cone around each of us. Ibrahim's Mirror effectively made everything in the cone 'transparent', the enchantment reproducing the sight almost perfectly. There were two weaknesses: one was a slight shimmer, like light on a mirror, whenever the cone first enveloped an outside object. The other was that anyone standing inside the cone was unaffected by the illusion. I cleared my throat.

"Let's get a move on," I said. "We only have so long before General Rumena strikes."

Crossing the canal itself was not particularly difficult. At this time of the day the water was shallow, barely more than waist-high, as a series of lock chambers upstream directed the overflow to channels feeding cisterns in Serolen's central districts. Water did not register as an object to Ibrahim's Mirror, so it was unseen that we got to the opposite shore. Akua climbed first, staying close so we would remain visible to each other, then helped up Masego and myself. We were careful to move quickly towards the earthen wall, dripping water on earth instead of stone as much as possible, where it would not remain noticeable.

We were between two 'watchtowers', neither of the Mighty perched atop the raised stones seeming to have noticed our crossing. Now, though, came the tricky part. There was no way for us to climb the palisade atop the earthen wall quietly enough; drow senses wouldn't hear us, which meant we'd have to get inventive. So we huddled close, cones overlapping, while Akua knelt by the bottom of the wall. She laid an elegant hand on the packed earth and began to murmur, trailing off into silence after repeating the same incantation ever more quietly the third time. Even standing behind her, I could barely feel the spell magic she used.

It was barely more than a spark, the same petty curse used again and again. The spell was a Wolofite creation, meant to soften an inch of someone's scalp so it was easier to rip out their hair. Fortunately, it could also be used to soften *earth*. Akua withdrew her hand after a moment, then began to dig. It was like digging into a garden's black earth, not an effort in the slightest, and she stopped after hitting hard earth again while Masego and I scattered the earth about. It took six instances before we had a path, then another three until it was widened enough we could crawl and wiggle our way through.

We hurried up the hills as I kept an eye on the Yashala sentinels, who seemed blessedly unaware of what had gone on under their nose. It wouldn't last forever, sadly. One of them would find the hole or notice the irregularities in the earth and then an alarm would be sounded. Hopefully, though, we'd be past the territory of the Yahsala Sigil by then. Let them arm up and go on war footing all they wanted, we weren't going back by their

territory anyway. Under the cover of a copse of trees we stopped, patting ourselves free of the clinging earth, and huddled close to negate the cones.

"Everyone fine?" I murmured.

Nods. We'd agreed to speak as little as possible.

"Then we take the Soaring Stairs," I spoke with a grimace. "Let's go."

Alas, they were the fastest way through. They weren't difficult to find, though as in many parts of Serolen I found the sudden transition from thick woods to monument a little jarring. Slowly sloping stone stairs two wagons wide began at the end of a beaten dirt path leading to the canal, rising for what had to be the better part of a mile. Beginning at the bottom, steps had been painted in vivid colours over which Crepuscular glyphs were inscribed in pure white. Each was the name of a Mighty that had attempted to reproduce the famous deed for which the monument was named: begin at the top of the stairs as an ispe and slay enough foes by the time you'd reached to bottom to have become a rylleh. The Cabal of the Soaring Stairs had gathered ispe by the thousands every ten years to attempt it in some sort of grisly ritual festival, but as far as I knew none had ever succeeded after the first.

They were an exquisite sight, cutting through a few more hills and then the beginning of an inhabited district with houses and temples and makeshift streets, but they were also fucking stairs. Near deserted at this time of the day, at least, but since I couldn't use Night to dull the pain I had to rely on the herbs I'd taken earlier. They were working for now, but I already feared what the trip back would feel like when their effect went away. The three of us moved in silence, hurrying as much as we could. Masego was less than athletic and I limped, so admittedly we were not the fastest infiltrators Calernia had ever seen.

On both sides of us the territory of the Yashala was splayed out, the serpentine streets slithering around knots of houses and towers. Firstborn liked to cluster houses together, build them to have common roofs. It felt more like the roof of a cavern that way, and less like the sky of the Burning Lands where they had come. It made for strange streets, knots of houses and shops and temples popping up like mushroom patches as trees grew through everything and paths winded around in every direction. I let my gaze wander a bit, but not too much. We were not here to sightsee.

"Catherine," Masego murmured, just loud enough for me to hear, "we have a problem."

I paused halfway through a step.

"I'm listening," I said. "What-"

Behind us Night flared, streaks of light touching the sky. It was coming from near the canal. An alarm, sent up by the Mighty.

"That," Masego said, coming close enough I could see him point ahead.

I looked up at the top of the Soaring Stairs, where a warband was massing. A few dzulu, taking the front, even began sweeping down the stairs. *Fuck*. They'd found us out too early.

"Change of plans," I said.

"Indeed?" Akua murmured.

"Follow me," I said.

And I leapt down into the streets to the side, the two of them following after a beat. I swallowed as scream as my bad leg throbbed, then adjusted my cloak on my shoulders.

It looked like we'd be doing this the hard way.

## Chapter 45: Kernel (Redux)

*"Understand this: divinity is an act of murder. A god can have no beginning or end; both must be slain without hesitation."*

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

I thought I'd gotten a sense of the Yeshala territory, but I'd been wrong.

The streets weren't empty the way it'd seemed from up on the Soaring Stairs. Sure, it wasn't exactly a market fair out here but neither was it a ghost city with a few terrified souls shivering behind closed doors. The three of us had barely turned our first corner before we nearly stumbled over a handful of nisi sitting in an alcove and chatting about a recent game of *inic cin* as they wove reed baskets. None of them noticed the edge of our illusions glimmering against the wall, but we quickened our pace anyway. They were the first drow we encountered, but hardly the last.

We found a sort of half-hidden trading where dzulu were bartering meat and greens for small wooden beads and sharpened obsidian – well shaped, fit to serve as knife blades – and mere streets later drow were sneaking to the side a run-down temple painted entirely in shades of yellow to hang small white ribbons from hooks on a wall. The ribbons were simple cloth, but I could see

that there were glyphs on the hooks. Prayers for luck and good health, for the misfortune of your enemies. Life still breathed in Yeshala lands, it just kept out of sight. Like rats hiding from the light.

Never once did we see a Mighty anywhere, though perhaps that should not have been a surprise. There were so very few of them compared to the numbers of the Firstborn, not even one in ten, and none of what we'd seen would be of interest to them. Nisi were expected to do all this, the labour of keeping cities standing, because it was the work fit for them. Real drow, real people, pursued only the accumulation of Night. Nothing else was worthy of one's time. Still, it was evident the Yeshala had seen better days.

That so much of the territory was run down or broken meant the Mighty were using dzulu and nisi for war labour, not abandoning them to their affairs, and the consequences of that were obvious. They wouldn't have been, in the Everdark, but deep down that was why I believed that Kurosiv's philosophies – which would survive them, I had no doubt of that – were doomed to lose. See, when the Firstborn had been living in grand old ruins sigils had been able to fight over who got the nicest part and it'd reinforced the order of things: fight well, gain Night, live better.

Now, though, it wasn't so simple. Serolen was a trove of stolen treasures, but large parts of it had been built over the last few years. And those quarters had been unquestionably superior for nisi and dzulu, who'd never got to taste comfort anyway since the niceties were reserved for Mighty. Nine out of ten Firstborn had been force-fed the realization that they didn't actually need Mighty to make their lives better. And whenever sigils turned to the old favourites, raiding all the neighbours and slaughtering on a whim, now Firstborn were actually losing something. Their comfortable lives were being infringed on.

One of the first things my father ever taught me was that the tool tyrants needed to maintain their grip on power was not fear but *apathy*. And just like Mazus squeezing the blood out of Laure until there was the scent of revolt in the air, the Mighty here were chipping away at that apathy one inconvenience at a time.

Even if you'd only risen an inch from the bottom of the barrel, no one liked losing that inch. Mighty who kept too close to the old ways, Kurosiv's gospel, made things worse for the bulk of the Firstborn. In Procer or Callow that'd end with the nobles knifed and changes made, but of course it wasn't that simple here. It took more than sleep and a knife in the back to kill a sigil-holder. But the wind was turning against the old ways, because the old ways were fucking awful for everyone except the strongest Mighty and now there was a visible, known alternative.

So the Mighty would find their cattle growing less and less obedient, apt to lashing out through the means the tenets of Iserre had given them, and the clever ones would learn to go with the wind. They'd use it to increase their power at the expense of their rivals, throwing a few concessions at nisi and dzulu as the price of prosperity, until it became common sense that it was the better practice. And then, one day, the cattle would grow mutinous again. Maybe they'd look at other kingdoms and see their lives could be better, or because the Mighty got too hungry again and their subject suffered for it.

The reason didn't matter so much as what would happen: all of this, once more. The same cycle, over and over again. All the Kurosivs of the world lost eventually, because they weren't the natural order of a single goddamn thing – they were parasites.

And no matter how tight the saddle, you could only ride a tiger for so long before it remembered it wasn't a horse.

We ghosted through the streets, avoiding people as much as we could and heading straight north. We'd have to take one of the winding paths around the hills to get to the Relic Grove, but the wasted time taking the streets had cost us was worth it. The Soaring Stairs and the other large avenues would be crawling with Mighty by now and there were bound to be a few with a Secret that'd see through Ibrahim's Mirror. Our gamble was that by the time they'd realized this was an infiltration instead of the prelude to an attack and begin sweeping through the territory, we'd be long gone.

I was not fool enough to call it a success yet, but these were odds I'd roll dice on.

We took a long, diagonal street leading to the northwest because it was completely empty but the longer that lasted the more uneasy I felt. Akua clearly felt the same, as she gestured for us to stick closer together. We found out why the street – and all those around it – were empty after we got to the end of it, finding a marketplace stripped bare. At the heart of it, hammered into the paving stones, a large iron pillar covered in number glyphs stood. To it were bound what had to be at least three hundred dzulu, thick chains to which drow were shackled on both sides radiating out of the pillar like spokes of a wheel.

The paint on many of their faces was faded or cracked, but there was no mistaking that these people came from at least a dozen different sigils. At least half, though, were Yeshala. Bile began to rise in my throat as I took steps closer, shaking off Akua's warning touch on my arm. It was the pillar I looked at, the count being kept. Numbers, but also a few words. Not just these dzulu but also a dozen 'batches' before them. Mighty had carved into the iron pillar how many were to be kept and for how long, the number glyphs ominously slashed through when the time had passed.

"They man the pillars with their own people when they don't take enough of ours," I murmured, genuinely appalled. "Mighty Yeshala was the one who sent its dzulu here."

It was one thing to know that even dzulu were considered barely better than animals in the eyes of Mighty, another to see them chained here like cattle awaiting the abattoir. Akua stood at my side, golden eyes hooded as she studied the pillar.

"They are meant for the tower in the Relic Grove," she murmured. "It is why the pillar is so close to Rozhan territory without needing defence: these lives are claimed by a higher power."

My fingers clenched. I'd known they were taking dzulu from our side of the canals, Rumena had told me as much in the war council, but it hadn't been sure whether it was as work slaves or sacrifice. *I should have known, I thought. If they wanted pairs of hands, they would have taken nisi as well. They want dzulu because there's a few Secrets' worth of Night in them.* Masego was the only one of us who could not fluently speak and read Crepuscular, so he shot us a curious look.

"When are they meant to be moved?" he asked. "Knowing the frequency of the sacrifices will be of some use."

"Two days," I grimly replied.

If this didn't end in two days, the drow I was looking at were all dead. Or worse. *And I don't think I can end this in two days.* Akua met my gaze from the corner of hers, visibly sharing in the thought. She looked away after a beat.

"Other Firstborn seem to be avoiding the area," Masego noted. "We should continue down this street, it will quicken our pace and lessen the risks."

Throat tight, I nodded. Grim as the logic was, it wasn't untrue. But before we could move, there was an interruption.

"We need," Akua Sahelian quietly said, "to free them."

I felt the weight of those golden eyes on me without needing to turn. My heart clenched. The calculus was plain to see, as it so often was at times like this. If we freed them, the enemy would know we'd been here. Maybe not immediately, but sooner than otherwise. And if we got caught, were forced to retreat or fight our way out before getting to the tower, it might be a lot more than three hundred drow that died for it. And on the other side of the balance was a hard truth: if we did not save these people, they were dead. And we would condemn them to that fate simply because of a risk, a potential danger. Not a certain consequence.

I knew the choice I would have made if I'd come alone. Knew it deeply, instantly. And some part of me recoiled at the thought of how very comfortable with sacrifices I had become.

"Masego?" I asked.

"So long as the spell is not too powerful, I can maintain the Mirrors through it," Hierophant said.

He did not seem particularly concerned with the moral question to wrestle with, I thought. Indifference, or was he simply trusting me to wrestle with it for him? Sometimes it was hard to tell.

"I have had enough of shackles, Catherine," Akua murmured. "Especially those made of iron."

I studied her face. She had already made her decision, I realized. She would free the dzulu whatever I said. And so I shivered, knowing in that moment that I had both succeeded beyond my wildest hopes and entirely lost control of the situation. So I said the only thing I could say.

"We must be quick," I replied, "and then cut through the Rozhan territory in a straight line."

It wasn't even that difficult, when it came down to it. The shackles had been made to resist Night, not sorcery, and so Akua sent a spell shivering down the nine chains one after another that simply popped the shackles open. The dzulu milled about uncertainly, some even fearfully. Thinking it might be a trap. But when one of them hesitantly tried to leave and nothing struck it down, there were excited shouts and within moments they were scattering in every direction. We waited until our path was clear, then ran for the Rozhan grounds to the east.

I could not see Akua's face, but somehow I knew she was smiling.

—

The Rozhan were a smaller sigil than the Yashala, having taken up a territory that was a thick half-circle around the east of the Relic Grove. Theirs were poor lands, most of them still woods, and their inhabited holdings were essentially knots of houses and temples closely clustered together in clearings. The rest was tall trees split only by a few paths, used for hunting and patrolled by Mighty but otherwise abandoned. Cutting through wasn't all that difficult. The Rozhan were on war footing as well, though, so we did have to duck two patrols that we might not have known were coming if not for my ties to the Night.

Just because I couldn't tell how many there were or how strong didn't mean I couldn't feel them coming at all. Kurosiv was yet a usurper.

Before long we reached the end of a shallow dirt path and found ourselves standing at the edge of our destination: the Relic Grove. Only a threshold made of four arm bones lined up between two twisting oaks announced the end of Rozhan territory, but all three of us could sense it. There was power in the air, and the fog we could see up ahead was not of natural make.

"I have been looking forward to this," Masego cheerful admitted. "The Firstborn usually shy away from anything that could be considered necromancy, it is an interesting change of pace."

"The Twilight Sages left scars," I said, "but this isn't necromancy, not exactly. Technically Mighty Kavian is still alive."

"But not truly sentient," Akua noted. "Ego death is still a manner of death."

Masego nodded in approval.

"We're not getting into that debate here," I said, sensing tricky grounds. "We have work to do. Do you remember the rules?"

"We must always be in contact," Masego said, sounding displeased.

"Do not touch the grave-trees," Akua dutifully added.

"Good," I grunted. "I'll go in front, Zeze behind me. Let's try not to wake up Kavian, yeah?"

Settling into a single file line, Akua taking my cloak and Masego hers, we passed the threshold of bones. To the power-blind the Relic Grove would have seen like nothing more than misty old woods, the trees tall and twisted and its grounds covered with dead leaves no matter the season, but the illusion lasted only as long as it took us to encounter the first grave-tree. In the side of large, thick ash tree whose branches were spreading out like the fingers of a hand, there lay a small stone stele to which a drow skeleton had been nailed.

The part that had Masego's hand twitching at my back, though was that the Night in it had yet to fade.

"No relic," Akua murmured, sounding a little disappointed.

"There's probably a Secret or two in there that Mighty would value a great deal more than a fancy spear," I said.

"One cannot make an earring of a Secret, darling," she replied.

I rolled my eye, pulling us forward. One of the dangers of this place was that the Secret behind the mist would actively try to get us lost and make us stumble on graves, but there was no chance of that so long as I could feel the beacon of power that



was the obsidian tower in the distance. Mostly getting through was slow, tedious limping forward on a forest path that was barely distinguishable from the rest of the ground.

"How long have Mighty been trying to harvest Kavian?" Zeze asked.

"Seven hundred years and change," I said. "The days where entire sigils disappeared in there are long past, but they still get a few fools every year."

Akua let out an interested noise.

"Did you ask Sve Noc what Secret it is that allowed it to remain for so long?" she asked.

I snorted.

"Are you asking me, Sahelian," I drily said, "to reveal the secrets of my communion with dark goddesses simply so that your petty curiosity might be satisfied?"

There was a beat of silence.

"I am," Masego brightly replied.

I heard a half-choked laugh coming from the back. Fine, be that way.

"It's the Secret of Recurrent Echoes," I said, "only it's not actually supposed to last this long. Just a handful times, opportunities for the holder to murder some other drow and take their body."

And Mighty Kavian had spent the last few centuries methodically doing the latter, but never the former. Andronike figured something had gone wrong with the part of the Secret that maintained sapience, probably because Kavian had tried to make it repeat much more at the expense of mental stability. The end result was that a Night-presence of the old monster popped out whenever someone disturbed the Relic Grove, murdering everyone involved and shackling their Night before disappearing again. The whole thing was like fucking honey for Mighty: a fight against a legend and a massive payoff in Night if they won? It'd taken literal centuries before cocky sigil-holders stopped feeding their sigils into the place.

The Rozhan Sigil had come into existence out of scavenger crews that'd figured out how to get their hands on some of the lesser morsels from the outskirts without bringing down Kavian's wrath on their heads. They took care of the graves in exchange, apparently, and had some Secrets entirely about the matter. Back in the Everdark the Relic Grove had been a maze of stone and lichen buried at the bottom of a city that'd been shattered by a

dwarven incursion, but it had taken very well to being moved to Serolen. Kavian's blank consciousness had grown to permeate all the fucking trees around here, like some sort of sickness, and now there was...

"Stop," I whispered, and immediately they did.

The grave-tree before us was larger than the last, a massive willow that had grown around three steles, but that wasn't what had given me pause. There was a shape crouched on the branches, a slender drow whose eyes were scanning the mists. It passed over us twice without seeing us, my shoulders tensing as it did. See, the old Relic Grove had been stone and lichen. But this new one, moved into the woods? It'd had old, strong life to work with. Trees that'd been around for centuries, if not longer. And with Kavian's consciousness spread out, it had caused... echoes. The Mighty whose Night and belongings were the relic of the name drew from the life of the trees, forming these... things.

Little more than shadows, but wielding Night and completely unkillable. Even if they got repeatedly smashed into nothingness, all it would do was cause the shade to dwell into the tree until enough life accumulated again for it to manifest. It was possible to end the phenomenon by destroying the tree, of course, but anyone who did that instead got to deal with Mighty Kavian itself. None of us moved, even our breaths growing more quiet, but the shadow was still looking at the mist.

"It knows something is here," I murmured.

I got a shake from Masego at my back, agreement. Fuck, we weren't going to pass with it looking for us. And it was smart enough to notice the light from Ibrahim's Mirror when we got too close to something, those things were known to attack Mighty who used Secrets of stealth.

"Akua," I said. "Distract it."

A heartbeat of silence, then a quiet incantation. From the corner of my eye I saw a ghostly light bloom to our right, behind the thick leaves of an alder tree, and the shadow saw it too. Without hesitating it leaped in that direction, chasing the spell, and I tugged urgently for them to follow me. I put aside the pain in my leg, making haste, and I could see that the shadow was hacking away at the tree now – and the light further running away. A splendid choice of spell. Now we just needed to-

To come across another grave-tree, a twisted elm with two skeleton-adorned steles, before which stood a shadow wielding a long spear of crystal. And it'd definitely just see the light from Ibrahim's Mirror on the branches. Fuck. So that was why the mist had been trying to push us here. It was just smart and malicious enough for something like this.

"Keep touching," I said, "and *run*."

It didn't know where we were under the illusions, but that didn't matter: it came at us in a burst of Night, shattering all three spells in a single thrust. I wrestled down my instinct to turn around and fight, knowing that I was the only one who could guide us through the mist. Instead I ran as fast as I could, every stumble having me curse how fucking unnecessarily *long* their legs were compared to mine. No longer maintaining the Mirrors, Masego was freed to fight as well and I felt bursts of magic erupt behind me as I guided us through a thick knot of branches that whipped at my face.

Akua cursed and a pine shattered to our left as the faint pop of a shielding spell broke. I took us off the path and through bushes, ignoring the thorns as they tore at my cloak. Masego grunted and I felt the ripple of his aspect unleashed, something catching flame far behind. *Eye ahead*, Catherine, I reminded myself. I couldn't be sure how long we ran like that, weaving between trees and stones and winding forest paths, but my heart was pounding in my throat when we finally stopped. My back was drenched in sweat, but we'd finally shaken off the shadow.

"We are too far for it to follow," Hierophant panted.

He was even worse off than I was, I saw with a twinge of satisfaction. Akua, on the other hand, didn't even look like she was sweating. Urgh. Couldn't she be bad at more things? It was starting to get irritating. We caught our breath together, then Masego wove a new set of Mirrors.

"We're close," I told them. "It's up ahead."

We took our time with the last stretch, knowing it to be the most dangerous. The dead leaves covering the forest floor thinned, revealing smooth stone beneath. The trees here rooted through it, shattering stone and spreading rubble, and it seemed like every ten feet we came across one of the tree-graves. It took us almost as long for that last stretch as it'd taken us for the rest: I was in no mood for another run, so I had us circling whenever I caught sight of a shadow instead of risking being caught. But we got there, at long last, and from the mists rose the silhouette of a great obsidian tower.

Although it wasn't actually that great, I noticed when we got a little closer – stopping at the edge of the trees, wary of being seen by the Mighty that'd be guarding this place. The tower was maybe sixty feet wide and thrice as tall, nothing to sneer about but not exactly gargantuan. Made sense, if Kurosiv has set their minions to build several. It was pure obsidian, though, fitted not in blocks but like the polished pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The precision of that was impressive. Concerningly, though, I could see a fucking door.

A quick look told me there were windows at the very summit, large ones facing every cardinal direction, but were the people assigned here really forced to climb every time they wanted to enter?

"Can either of you see a way in?" I whispered.

Akua shook her head, but Masego was staring at the wall with his Summer-forged eye.

"There are hidden mechanisms in the pieces, bound to Night," Hierophant told us. "Releasing the workings would seem to free a slab to be pushed in."

"A secret door," Akua enthusiastically said. "Well done, Hierophant."

She was, I thought, enjoying this little jaunt a little too much.

"Can you Wrest it open?" I asked.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "But there are people within."

"The place is too thick with Night," I admitted, "I can't actually feel out drow. It's like smaller flames hidden in a bonfire."

"I can see four at the bottom of the tower," Hierophant said. "And some shapes at the summit, near the windows, but they are veiled."

It wasn't just anything that his eye would be unable to see through, so that smacked of Kurosiv weaving a little something. Best to avoid there entirely.

"Are the two parts of the tower connected?"

"They are. There is a middle chamber as well," Masego added. "The sacrificial altar."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"How do you know?"

"There are gutters for the blood," he said.

I swallowed a grimace. Shouldn't have asked. This was going to get tricky, I thought. There was bound to be at least one strong Mighty among the defenders, which meant I'd likely have to pull out Night and that would give away the game. *We'll have to crush them fast, get a look at the ritual and run*, I thought. There was no helping it. I turned towards them and-

"We need to move," Masego said. "They are coming out."

I blinked in surprise but did not argue. There had been nine drow in the tower, and every single one of the seven that left had been rylleh. There were, I gauged when they left and I could tell them apart from the ambient Night, not one but two sigil-holders among them. All of them went due west, leaving only two at the bottom. Once they had passed I voiced the question that had been on my mind the whole time.

"What are they going after?" I muttered. "There shouldn't be-"

I took a look at the eastern horizon for the first time, having a good angle at last, and paused. There was a large plume of smoke going up.

"Masego," I evenly said. "Did you set the Relic Grove in fire?"

"The shadow set the Relic Grove on fire," he corrected. "I only redirected the flame."

"Ah," Akua smiled, "so that is why they are leaving. They need to put out the flames before Mighty Kavian goes berserk."

"I'm going to get blamed for that one too, aren't I?" I sadly said.

"Well," Masego said, "you did bring me here. So in a sense, it *is* your fault."

That little shit. If I'd actually had the time to take him to task for that I would have, but we needed to get in and get gone before the enemy returned.

"Get us in," I ordered. "Akua, you and I hit them fast and hard."

We took our position smoothly, Akua already beginning to incant. I couldn't, since the moment I pulled on Night I'd be outed. Masego had neglected to mention that the slab of obsidian freed was ten feet tall, but he used the Night from the mechanisms to do so anyways. Which revealed two very surprised rylleh, both in Yeshara colours, baring their spears at us. I pulled on Night, quick and deep, and began to form a wedge of blackflame when... it unravelled? Akua's shrivelling curse took one of them in the chest, dropping it, but the other one shot through the door towards me as Night slipped through my fingers.

What the *fuck*?

I might actually have gotten a spear through the chest if Masego didn't Wrest again, killing the Secret it used to speed forward. It stumbled, and abandoning the thought of Night I instead focused my Name and struck: my sword cleared the scabbard in a heartbeat, cutting through the wrist that came up to defend the rylleh's neck. Akua hit it with a small curse that made it spasm,

though, and I smoothly drew back my blade and fainted – it moved to dodge to the left, and the edge of my blade went right into its skull. It spasmed again, Night gathering, but Masego killed whatever Secret that was before it could get away.

“Catherine,” Akua said, “what happened?”

My teeth clenched.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

But whatever it was, it’d nearly gotten me killed. We hurried inside, all of us aware our time was already beginning to run out, and took in the sight of the circular obsidian chamber. Every surface save for the carved stairs leading up to the central chamber was covered in glyphs, each carved into the precious stone and then filled with molten silver. It was striking sight, though that was not why my two mages paused. Masego took a few steps forward and then went still, eye moving without pause, while Akua took a slow turn around the chamber before kneeling in front of the wall facing the door.

I left them to that, instead limping to the nearest wall and rapping my knuckles against it once. Solid. I focused my Name and struck at it with my staff, the dead yew bouncing off. Yeah, that was fortified with Night. The impact wasn’t the same as if it was simple obsidian. Probably the whole damned tower had been built using it and it was running through like veins, which was why I’d had so hard a time picking out the drow inside. Destroying this place with Night would take me a long time, it’d be much easier with pure physical strength – and I didn’t have nearly enough of that on hand.

There’d be no breaking the tower tonight, and having Masego try to Wrest the threads running through was just asking for Kurosiv to get involved. This would stay a scouting trip, so we’d best make the most of it.

“So what are we looking at?” I asked.

Masego was in his trance, lost in thought, so it was my other mage I was speaking to. Akua frowned, still kneeling before the wall of silver glyphs.

“These towers are altars,” she said. “That much is certain.”

“Charnel pits to feed Kurosiv,” I said, not hiding my disgust.

The Sisters had made their entire race into an ever-red altar hidden behind the Gloom, once, but it had not been for their own benefit. This was simple, ugly greed.

"Indeed," the dark-skinned sorceress said, "but while this has been their function so far it does not appear to be their primary use."

"Ominous," I muttered. "So what *is*?"

Akua looked like she'd bit into a lemon as she rose back to her feet.

"I cannot tell," she admitted. "These are not structured like any glyphs I've seen before. Night-workings have a... syntax to them, Catherine, but it is entirely absent here."

"Because this is not a Firstborn ritual," Hierophant's calm voice cut through.

My fingers clenched.

"Tell me Kurosiv was not fucking fool enough to borrow a ritual from the Hidden Horror," I begged.

Masego took a step closer to Akua, ignoring me, and after demanding her attention without a word he raised his hand to point at a line of silver glyphs.

"There," he said. "And now two lines below, the closing half. You should recognize this."

Golden eyes followed his instructions, then narrowed.

"I cannot believe I missed that," Akua murmured.

"You have flesh eyes," Masego dismissed. "You cannot look at the entire pattern at once the way I can. It was only a matter of time before you recognize it."

I loudly cleared my throat, which finally got their attention.

"Someone," I said slowly, enunciating every syllable, "please tell me that Kurosiv was not fucking fool enough to *borrow a ritual from the Hidden Horror*."

The looks on their faces were not promising.

"It is not just a ritual," Akua told me.

"You've seen the original with your own eyes," Masego continued.

I froze.

"Wait, you're telling me..."

"This appears," Hierophant said, "to be an adjusted rendition of the ritual that destroyed the Kingdom of Sephirah and made Trismegistus into a god."

Fuck, I decided, was not quite strong enough a word for how bad things had just gotten.

—

Getting out of enemy territory was more long than difficult.

We just legged it north as far as we could, then circled until we reached one of the canals that fed Serolen's and took a boat back down. It was refreshingly uneventful, leaving me with a long while to digest what we'd found out. I was silent most of the trip, lost in my thoughts. Had the Dead King genuinely given out his oldest trick to a would-be rival, or was there a trap laid at the heart of the ritual? We couldn't know, not having seen only one of the towers, and I was beginning to think it wouldn't matter.

Either way, the Firstborn would end. Whether it was that Kurosiv devoured their kind and then Sve Noc or that Neshamah finished ripping out the Night as he'd attempted at the Battle of Hainaut, it would be a disaster that might lose us the war. The Dead King gaining Night would be significantly worse, but even if Kurosiv got their way without a hidden price then the young god would walk away and free all the armies assaulting Serolen to reinforce Keter just as it was getting besieged.

When we returned to the fortress I left my companions behind, heading directly to the airy temple at the summit where the Sisters roosted. It was a simple enough place from the outside, a rough square of stone whose roof was tiered and walls were entirely arches, but the inside was raw, untamed Night. Not even when I had tried to eat the Book of Some Things had the feel of it been so strong. I could no longer see or feel anything save an endless black expanse in ever direction, and it was in that void that the Sisters came to me.

Gods, even lesser gods, were beyond tiredness. Yet somehow I thought, looking at the two of them, that they seemed exhausted.

"We wane," Komena said, her eyes hard. "The tide has turned against us."

And I knew she was speaking the truth, for the mantle of divinity was feeble on their shoulders. Her voice had not echoed with things dimly understood, her very presence did not send a shiver down my back. Night had been made to suffer Ruin, and then been wounded further by Kurosiv's betrayal. They were goddesses still, but of a great deal less than before.



"Kurosiv is not stronger than you," I said. "I could still drive them out of their followers."

"Not yet," Andronike quietly agreed.

"It's why we need to fight them now," Komena said. "You know it's true, heart of my heart. If we wait until their strength surpasses ours, only defeat can ensue."

"They won't come out to fight you this easily," I said. "Their entire strategy is based on holding their ground, daring you to take a swing."

That was the conclusion I'd come to, on the way back. I'd thought that Kurosiv's strategy was oddly defensive, at first, considering the Dead King was pushing north towards Serolen and there were no iron cast guaranteed when dealing with Neshamah. How long could they truly afford to wait to become sole god of the Firstborn? Except I'd misread what they were actually after. It didn't give a shit what happened the drow, it was only after apotheosis. They'd gladly devour their own kind and walk away. So now it fell into place.

If we attacked their side of the river, the blood flowed to the towers and Kurosiv was strengthened while our numbers waned. If we waited this out, Kurosiv would finish its ritual and devour all its followed before taking a swing at Sve Noc.

"We would not be the victor in that strife," Andronike told me, having followed my thoughts. "We hold great power, but much of it is dispersed in others. It would be our lesser still, but..."

"Concentrated," I finished with a grimace.

Selfishness had its strengths. Still, it also had weaknesses.

"The defensive stance only works if their sigils stick with them," I said. "And I expect that, hardliners or not, few of those Mighty are going to be eager at the thought of being eaten. We need to arrange talks and out the truth."

If enough of them believed us, enough defected back, it might not even come to a fight between deities. We could just take back the towers by force and smash them before the bloodshed fed Kurosiv.

"Is it your right to attempt this," Andronike acknowledged.

I eyed them both with a frown. They weren't going to stop me, but neither was buying this as a solution. Why?

"You are First Under the Night," Komena curtly said. "You were appointed to attempt what we would not."

I decided to let it go. Their reasons were their own more often than not, why would this be any different? Besides, I had a more urgent worry.

"I tried to use the Night, when we were out at the tower, but it failed," I told them.

"That is known to us," Andronike said.

I rolled my eye.

"Then do you also know an answer to the question I shouldn't have to voice?" I asked. "What the Hells happened?"

Komena grimaced.

"The Night is coming apart," she said. "Your Hierophant took it to the brink of destruction and it has been pulled in too many directions since."

I winced.

"How bad?"

"The power itself is still functional, the trouble is that it is invested," Andronike said. "In Mighty, in workings, in Kurosiv's hoard. If it could be all returned to our hands and redistributed it could be mended, but as it is..."

"We will have to begin eating old workings soon," Komena said. "Else what you experienced will repeat."

"It is difficult to predict where the lack will happen," Andronike admitted. "There are too many wills involved."

So Night was finite, and it too many people took chunks of it up to wield there might not be enough left for whoever was trying to – even if they should be able to. That sounded, I thought, uncomfortably like the fate the Sisters had bargained to avoid: the Twilight Sages borrowing more than they could repay.

"We are not unaware," Andronike coldly said, "of the resemblance."

I raised a hand in appeasement.

"If we slice open Kurosiv our books are out of red, right?" I asked.

"Broadly so," Komena said.

"Then we start with that," I grimly said. "And fix the mess once we have their head on a pike."

The Crows hadn't picked me as their herald without reason: all I could feel from them at that plan was unyielding agreement.

—

Even Firstborn, whose concept of peace was closer to truce, had ways to hold talks.

Usually drow diplomacy was along the lines of threatening annihilation if immediate surrender was not given, sometimes a dash of exile or surrendering Mighty for harvesting, but that was between sigils. There wasn't really a precedent for the scale of the talks we'd asked for since the fall of the Empire Ever Dark, because until the exodus the drow had been united under Sve Noc. Well, divided under Sve Noc really but the supreme authority had been uncontested. So now that there were sigils under Kurosiv and sigils under us, the situation grew a little more complicated.

We settled on ten Mighty for either side, since keeping any more than twenty of that quarrelsome brood in close proximity was bound to result in fighting. The three of the Ten Generals in the city – Ysengral for us, Ishabog and Moren for them – were a given, as was Rumena. It might not have a rank in the Ten, having instead served as the commander of the Southern Expedition under me, but it was comparable or outright superior to many on the list. After that the ranks were filled with powerful sigil-holders, in case a fight did break out, and also me.

We met in the city centre, contested grounds, in a beautiful old temple called the Empty Shore. It was entirely made of wood, a rarity before the exodus, and though the outside was all vivid colours the inside had painted with impossible skill into the illusion of being the shore of a lake under the dark of night. And not a night from the Everdark, for there were even distant stars above. It was exceptionally beautiful, and though no ground was truly sacred to Firstborn most Mighty would hesitate before beginning strife that might destroy this place.

It was us that'd called the talks, so after the usual rounds of posturing – I refrained, knowing that my mastery of Crepuscular was too shallow to risk dipping my toe into the fast-paced trading of taunts – we were expected to state why everyone had been gathered here. I spoke up then.

"Tomb-maker," I ordered.

Night flared, Mighty tensing at the sensation, and behind me an obsidian wall covered in silvery glyphs. The very same we'd found at the heart of the tower. There was some shuffling on the side of our opponents, but neither of the Generals were surprised. They'd already figured out what last night had been about.

"I will speak plainly," I said. "This is not the work of the entity that titles itself Loc Ynan. It is a ritual of the Dead King's make, whose purpose is to make a god from the death of an entire people."

A pause on the other side.

"Not only us," I bluntly said, "but you as well. You will be the first to die when the Fate-Giver reveals what fate they truly have in mind for the Firstborn."

I'd expected a range of reactions to that revelation. Denial, dismay, maybe even violence. It wasn't even out of question that Kurosiv would decide the game was up and try to devour its followers immediately. But what I got, instead, was *laughter*.

"See," Moren Bleakwomb mockingly smiled, "it is as was foretold. Now that they fail against our might, they resort to the cheapest of tricks."

My fingers clenched.

"This is not a trick," I flatly said. "I am willing to-"

"It does not matter even if your false gods have tricked you, *human*," Moren said, using the word as one would filth. "We know the truth. Sve Noc tried to devour us once, and you think sweet whispers will let us do away with our protection?"

It all went downhill from there.

We got out without a fight, in the end, but we'd lost face and was quietly furious as we returned. The Sisters had hidden something from me, something that'd made all of this a fool's errand, and I confronted them with the petty mistake. They were neither of them cowed by my anger, but they did deign to provide explanation.

"When sigils began to defect, we took measures," Komena said.

My lips thinned.

"You tried to drain the Night out of the traitors," I said. "Like they claimed."

"It failed," Andronike plainly said. "There were some who were made nisi, but the leech was ready for us. It usurped mastery of what you call the 'nails', severing us from the traitors."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Of course, the existence of the nails was a secret that only a few knew. So when Kurosiv had told their faithful that it took towers to keep Sve Noc at bay, they'd had no reason to disbelieve it. *And if I were an ambitious god, I'd even fake a few drains to remind my subject of why keeping*

*the altars wet is so important.* And I realized, suddenly, why it was that the Sisters had let me walk into those talks without telling me. Weakness. It was the same reason they'd used Ivah to tell me about the collapse of the Gloom instead of using dreams. They were ashamed of looking weak in front of me.

Neither of them addressed the thought, and not for lack of seeing it. I took it for the tacit admission that it was. No quite enough for me to forgive the way they'd let me make a fool of myself, but enough that I was willing to change the subject.

"We've been outplayed," I said. "There's no reason for the defector sigils to believe us and every reason for them not to."

Kurosiv had been planning this for even longer than I'd thought, and planning it *smart*.

"We must prepare for war," Komena said. "It will come down to the fangs, Catherine Foundling."

A war of gods, she meant. Kurosiv and the Crows, savaging each other for rule of the Night and likely destroying most of their race in the process. My goddesses didn't want to slaughter their own, but they'd still choose that above getting swallowed up by the usurper. I clenched my fingers then unclenched them.

"No," I finally said. "We still have one card left to play."

This was a game of decide, now, and I just happened to have brought to Serolen the finest expert of that art in all of Calernia.

—

It wasn't exactly hard to find Masego. He was in his laboratory again, dissecting another corpse. How he was being kept supplied in fresh bodies was a question I'd decided not to ask. I plopped down in the chair I was pretty sure he was leaving there mostly for my visits, then groaned as I stretched out my tired limbs. He didn't turn, but I felt his eye glance at me through the back of his head before returning to the corpse.

"We can't stop the ritual from happening," I informed him.

Masego paused in his study, leaving the ribcage of the drow whose internal organs he'd been looking at kept open by steel contraption.

"I thought that might be the case," Hierophant replied. "It is a clever conundrum they present us with. Making war to destroy the towers might strengthen Kurosiv enough it can slay Sve Noc, while leaving our foe to their devices ensures they will devour much of the remaining Night and then your patronesses afterwards."

I was entirely unsurprised he'd caught on to that. Masego might be utterly uninterested in war as a rule, but deicide was an exception. To him this would be a genuinely interesting puzzle to figure out, or maybe something more along the lines of fencing.

"Diplomacy has failed," I said. "We tried to warn Kurosiv's sigils, but they got their story out long before we even knew it needed contradicting."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"And their excuse?"

"Sve Noc tried to drain the rebels out of Night when the first raised their flags," I said. "They've been claiming the towers are tools to ensure that can never happen."

The rebel Mighty probably figured that Kurosiv was skimming off the top, but that we'd come out trying to get them to pull down the towers had instead probably cemented in their minds that they needed to stay up at all costs. The talks had come across like an attempt to land a killing stroke now that we were losing, not us trying to save their damned hides. Masego let out an amused noise.

"And so the few Mighty capable of deciphering parts of the glyph array recognize the parts related to draining and believe them," he said. "Perhaps we should consider backing this Kurosiv instead, Catherine. They certainly seem to be the more skillful of these would-be gods."

"That's not in the cards," I firmly said.

Even if it were possible to convince Kurosiv to turn on the Dead King and refrain from devouring their race, they were chronically untrustworthy and their ideals were repellent to me. On top of that, in the long term I'd just be saddling Procer with another kind of enemy looming to its north. No, there was no bargain to be made there. Besides the Sisters might be a pair of murderous, thieving crows but they were *my* murderous and thieving crows. We'd entered the nightmare together and we would leave it just the same.

"Unfortunate," Masego shrugged. "So what is it to be our plan?"

"If we can't stop the ritual," I said, "then that leaves us only one choice."

He leaned forward, face brightening.

"Usurping it," Hierophant said, sounding pleased. "A most interesting idea."

"We came here to gather the original Night anyway," I pointed out. "We can kill two birds with one stone. When Kurosiv tries to eat the Firstborn, instead we return all the Night to Sve Noc and wipe the slate clean. We shake off the Bard, get our affairs in order and move to join the fight in Keter."

"That should be possible," Masego mused.

"Good," I grinned. "We can return with an army of refreshed drow at our back, which sh-"

"Ah, you misunderstand me," Zeze absent-mindedly interrupted. "It is possible if, like Kurosiv, you are willing to kill every living drow in the process."

The grin went away.

"Start from the premise that I'm not willing to do that," I said.

"Then you expect too much of me," he honestly replied. "I am not familiar enough with Night or soul work to do this to the level of precision you require."

He paused.

"I could perhaps lower the casualties to somewhere between two thirds and four fifths," Masego finally added. "Anything more than that would require Akua's help."

It was a life raft, and I boarded it eagerly.

"But with her help you could do better," I said.

"Presumably," he said. "She has experience harnessing the power of lesser gods into fixed systems that I lack, and her arrays in Liesse were precise to a degree I had believed unfeasible. As for soul work, we've explored different branches of the discipline – it is conceivable that she would know a method to remove the nails safely that I would not."

"Then we're putting the two of you on this," I said. "Everything else is kicked down the ladder, Zeze. Anything you two need you get it, and even if the Dead King comes knocking at the gates I want you to keep working on our usurpation ritual."

He didn't look all that happy about being interrupted in his study of Firstborn physiology, but the kind of work I'd asked would not be unpleasant to him. If he'd not already been getting into his own project, I suspected that he'd be outright eager.

"I'll inform her myself," I continued. "In the immediate, do you need anything to get started?"

The glimmering eye swivelled towards me, visible under the cloth.

"Live test subjects," Hierophant said. "Expect deaths. Our first attempt to remove the nails are unlikely to be anything less than traumatic."

My stomach clenched, but I slowly nodded. I'd ask for volunteers, people knowing the risks. But if I couldn't get enough?

Well, I guessed we'd see how far I was willing to go when extinction was on the line.

## Chapter 46: Penultimate

*"So spoke Maleficent: 'To sit this throne is to be debtor and indebted: I owe and am owed, tethered by the oath that raised me. Let this empire forget not it took myriad hands to raise the Tower.'"*

– Extract from the Scroll of Chains, first of the Secret Histories of Praes

I sometimes felt like the shepherd from the stories, stumbling on the half-buried lamp and rubbing it so I might ask the djinn for wishes.

Though there were two wonder-makers in Serolen and neither were bound to anything as dingy as a lamp, it was still betting it all on their ability to make my wish come true: usurp Kurosiv's apotheosis ritual without killing thousands, if not millions, of Firstborn. Sve Noc had allowed me time to find a solution, a way other than them rolling up their sleeves and getting into a death match with their would-be devourer, but what was the point if the medicine was as brutal to the drow as the disease?

If the deaths were inevitable the Sisters would choose their talons over faith in Hierophant's works, whom they neither liked nor trusted. They'd been clear about that much. I had been given much authority as First Under the Night, but ultimately I was not a queen here for all that they called me one. I was a councillor and it was not my place to decide how they were to defend their godhead, or what fate they would countenance for their people. It was frustrating to have my hands tied, but I knew that to be unfair.

I had kept myself in check in Praes because there was still so much about that land I did not understand, too much to have the right to make the decisions I wanted to, and every bit of that was a hundred times as true in Serolen. It still left me restless. Ysengral and Rumena did not need me to fight their defence against the traitors for them, a kind of warfare I had little experience in besides, and unless either of the Traitor Generals came out to fight I wasn't needed for muscle either.



It left me in the uncomfortable position of being the highest-placed person in Serolen after Sve Noc in principle, but having very little to do in practice. Instead of going around chewing at my nails I turned to the Losara, the sigil I had founded in the Everdark and charged with the duty of priesthood and oathkeeping. The numbers of it had increased tenfold under Ivah's careful stewardship, but unlike any other sigil inexistence its numbers were spread out all over Firstborn territory – there weren't that many of them in Serolen, but then they weren't supposed to be fighting anyway.

It was not unlike holding court back in Laure, handling petitions to the crown. My Lord of Silent Steps had affairs in hand, not unexpectedly, so it was the matters related to my title of First Under the Night that were asked of. Which left me sitting with a bearded old drow who looked about to keel over. Its wheezing was not to enough to deceive me into thinking it weak, though: its presence in the Night burned, powerful among the rylleh of the Losara.

"This one would not dare question the designs of one so high," Mighty Trokel said, "yet it is not time, Losara Queen, for your words to be set down?"

"You want a book out of me," I said, almost amused.

Their fate of their entire race was in the balance and yet they wanted a holy book out of me. Mighty Trokel inclined its head in agreement, another Mighty – a younger one called Solvobod, my purple paint not covering only its face but instead its entire bare torso – picking up the thread.

"It is known that the First Under the Night has no time to spare for setting down its sayings," Mighty Solvobod said, "and this is only sensible."

"Of course," I drily agreed. "And?"

Much hemming and hawing as they tried to figure out how not to offend me with their request, until I got it out of them: they wanted to assign me a scribe, someone to set down my words and ask me questions whenever I had the moment. A tortured compliment about my being a skilled speaker of riddles was unravelled down to the blunter bone of them being aware that I usually only taught through conversation, so they figured the only way they'd get a book out of me was someone actually following me around and doing that.

I wasn't exactly eager at the prospect and made it clear that certain conversations would be barred, which they fell over each other to agree, but they weren't *wrong* to ask this of me. I'd been named First not because the Crows thought I had a knack for religion but because I was well placed to serve as a herald and

advisor, someone who could help them fit the Firstborn in the complicated tapestry of the Burning Lands, but I was their high priestess. I could not leave only silence behind me.

"And I suppose you've already a scribe in mind for that?" I asked.

"This one offers itself to the purpose," Mighty Trokel replied, stopping to wheeze halfway through.

I mulled over that. It was rylleh, so it could be counted on to get out of the way without dying pointlessly when fights came. I glanced at Ivah.

"Mighty Trokel has some renown as a chronicler," my Lord of Silent Steps noted.

An endorsement, in other words, but I was not satisfied.

"How old are you, Trokel?" I asked.

The old drow looked surprised. While it was nowhere as aged in looks as Rumena it lacked the bland agelessness of most its kind, so I'd bet a couple of centuries at least.

"This will be my six hundred and thirty-third year, Losara Queen," Mighty Trokel said. "I once thought to die an ispe, but had a stroke of fortune in war."

Meaning it'd gotten to harvest a motherlode of Night and found its lifespan significantly expanded, but gotten stuck looking older and never bothered to change the look. Six hundred and thirty-three years, I thought, the vast majority of which it would have spent as rylleh or close. The highest of the Mighty, save for those who ruled over even Mighty.

"Ivah," I said, "who is the youngest among the Losara?"

"I am uncertain," the silver-eyed drow admitted. "But I can know the answer in an hour's span, Losara."

It paused.

"Nisi, almost certainly," Ivah added.

Yeah, I'd figured it would be one of them. It was why I'd asked.

"Find out," I ordered. "I want called to me the youngest Losara who knows their glyphs."

Surprise, and not just from my steward among the Losara. They'd caught on quick.

"You mean to make them your scribe," Ivah said.

Trokel, I noted, had not dared to do the same. Perhaps fearing I would take it as insubordination and rip the life out of it.

"I will have two," I said. "Trokel, old and rylleh. And the other, young and nisi."

I met the old drow's eyes, saw how it looked like it was itching for a pen, and for a moment I was improbably reminded of Nestor Ikaroi.

"You stand high, Trokel," I said. "Sometimes that's the worst place to look at history from."

My Name thrummed in approval, pleased, and it warmed my veins. They bowed. I told them Trokel would begin following me as soon as the other scribe was found and that was the end of the petition, though I cut short entertaining another: word came through a runner that one of my wonder-makers had left the room where they'd been holed up in half a day.

It was time for me to have a talk with Akua Sahelian.

—

Akua had taken to wearing black since we'd come to Serolen, I'd noticed.

It wasn't enough to make her blend in with the Firstborn – that would have been difficult, when she had curves enough for a dozen of them – but it did make her stand out less than, say, Cordelia Hasenbach and her colourful riding dresses. Tonight it was a loose, long dress with faint accents of gold swirling up the ribs she'd chosen to wear, paired with a cloak of the same cloth and a gauzy black veil that cascaded halfway down to her back. The veil was kept in place by a slender carved band of gold, one of the few pieces of jewelry she still wore nowadays.

It was far from the most alluring dress she'd ever put on, but there was something attractive about how obviously comfortable she was in the clothes. This was, I dimly realized, as dressed down as she'd probably been allowed to be back in Wolof. It would never do for a Sahelian to be *too* casual in their clothes, yeah?

"Now you stare," Akua said, sounding genuinely exasperated. "Should I just have put on a mutton's pelt a few years ago and called it a day, Catherine?"

Her wearing only a pelt actually sounded like something I wouldn't mind seeing in the slightest, but I decided that lying shamelessly was the best part of valour.

"Of course not," I lied. "I was just wondering where you've been keeping all these dresses."

"Pocket realms," she archly replied. "I forged one while in Praes and a second on the way to Salia."

I really should start using Night to do that, I noted, I had the capacity.

"Good to know," I said, then invited her to sit.

She did, still eyeing me with some irritation. Unlike me, who had to fold like a praying mantis, she somehow made sitting at the low tables the drow preferred a graceful thing. How she managed that with legs longer than mine I'd never be sure, but it was probably dark magic of some sort. I worked out a kink in my shoulder, then caught her eye.

"So," I said, "what's the verdict?"

"It is theoretically possible," Akua said, and I did not hide my relief.

"Casualties?"

"From taking back the Night?" she replied. "None."

"Masego was worried taking out the nails would kill them," I said.

"Masego has not powered rituals with sacrificed fae before," she retorted without batting an eye. "Winter's mark is still deep in the Night, Catherine, which resulted in some useful secondary properties. Ripping out the nail would certainly result in death, but *dissolving* it is possible without killing the host."

I slowly nodded.

"And in the moments they're all left without Night," I began, then trailed off in invitation.

"If dawn comes to pass without it being restored, I imagine nearly all Firstborn save for dzulu and nisi would die," Akua mused. "Night is what extends their lifespan."

"So we'll be flipping the hourglass the moment we begin this," I muttered.

Which was a risk, but not an unacceptable one. I felt Sve Noc brush against my thoughts and cocked my head to the side, silently asking the question. A soft brush back, pregnant with intent. No, it wasn't a dealbreaker. *Good*.

"We've got divine blessing so far," I said, leaning forward. "So what do you need to get it done?"

There she grimaced.

"Living drow willing to let their nail be dissolved so we can find a method that will not have grave consequences," Akua said.

I nodded.

"We've sent out for volunteers and you already have a hundred," I said.

"We'll need Mighty, Catherine," she gently said. "They have a deeper connection to the power, it will react differently."

I clenched my fingers.

"They might have to be prisoners," I admitted. "We have some lined up for when it's been tried, but none want to be the first."

Sve Noc had so far declined to make it an order to one of their Mighty to lay down on the slab. I was both relieved and indignant that'd been their decision. On one hand, did they know what the stakes were? On the other, Gods, let there be at least one side in this nightmare that halfway deserved to win.

"The point of the procedure will not be to kill," Akua finally said, "but is a fine line, Catherine."

I grimaced.

"But no so fine," I said, "you won't walk it."

I was right and we both knew it. She looked away.

"What choice is there?" she asked.

"Always less than we'd like," I murmured, "and yet we go on."

The silence that hung between us was not restful. She was not happy, and I could not quite shake the metaphorical pebble in my boot.

"How many rituals is it that you've asked me now?" Akua idly asked, golden eyes returning to me.

There was an expression in them I found hard to read.

"Depends on how you count them," I hedged.

"You always dole out power and trust so freely," the dark-skinned sorceress. "I once believed that your great flaw, you know."

"Not anymore?"

Her lips faintly quirked.

"This ritual you ask, it will put in our hands a gift of the Gods Below themselves," Akua said. "How can you be certain neither of us will be tempted to claim it?"

"I can't," I admitted.

She leaned forward.

"How can you be certain it will truly do what we tell you it will?" she asked.

"I can't," I repeated. "Anymore than I can be sure Vivienne didn't spend the last few years undermining me as Queen of Callow, or that Hakram didn't use me to become the Warlord. It's impossible to know for sure, Akua. Some things you take on faith."

Her lips pursed. Not an answer that satisfied. I was, I suspected, being tested somehow. For what I could not know, but it behooved me to tread carefully.

"And should I decide that simply being handed trust and power to wield at your order is not enough?" Akua quietly asked. "That I, too, want to decide?"

My fingers clenched and slowly unclenched. A test, I thought, but a lie here would be a mistake. I met that golden gaze with my mismatched own, the eye I'd been born to and the one I'd lost, and breathed out. A year ago, I was not sure what I'd have answered. But today? I still remembered that moment in the streets, looking at the dzulu in chains, and who it was that'd not been willing to walk away. Some things, I'd told her, you took on faith. But there was more to it than that, and that was the question that lay hidden behind those golden eyes. *Am I a prisoner on a longer leash, Akua was asking, or am I what you say I am?* One of us.

"Then I trust your judgement," I quietly replied.

Her face went blank. She nodded, curtly, and rose to her feet. Back to work, not that she even made the excuse, and as I watched her leave my stomach clenched. *Pivot*, I thought. Faint enough I'd not sense it. A personal one.

And it was too early to tell whether or not I'd regret the answer I'd just given.

—

I'd expected Cordelia to keep busy, given that she was not a woman prone to idleness, but I was surprised when the Losara watchers I'd put on her told me exactly how busy she'd been. Apparently her every waking hour was spent either meeting with

sigil-holders or historians, her translators stuck as close to her as shadows. I caught her after a meeting with one of the rylleh of the Ysengral – no matter her old rank or recent exploits, she did not warrant the time of one of the Ten Generals – and got her to sit down long enough for a drink and a meal. Neither were of the kind of quality she must have been used to, but I did notice she dug into the pheasant with relish.

“I enjoy the taste of game,” Cordelia admitted, “but I had to refrain in Salia. A noticeable preference for hunted birds would have drawn comment.”

“Ah,” I hummed. “The Lycaonese savage enjoying hunting too much would have been a bad look.”

I received a thin smile that pretty much confirmed my guess. During the years where Cordelia was an outright foe, I’d never considered how fragile her position truly was. She’d pretty much won the Great War, that much was true, but the years of peace afterwards had been extremely dangerous to her. She was a Lycaonese ruling southern peoples who tended to dislike and dismiss her kind, walking a tightrope even when her victory had still been fresh. It was no wonder she’d had to be so careful with the perception of her, when you looked at what her reliable supporters had been.

The core of her backers were damn far from Salia on top of being the poorest, least populated and least influential of the principalities. The Lycaonese had proved in the wars then and since that their armies were the finest in Procer and punched well above their weight, but she couldn’t actually bring that strength to bear: most of it had to remain pointed north, keeping back either the Chain of Hunger or the Dead King. She’d built a bloc of southern supporters, sure but her majority in the Highest Assembly had never been large or solid.

It’d been only cleverness and her initial reserve of goodwill from winning the Great War that’d allowed her to push through her early reforms. Well, that and skillfully getting the people on her side. For a foreign savage come to the capital as a conqueror, however gentle of one, Cordelia Hasenbach had been impressively well-loved by the people of Salia.

“I was always surprised,” I said, “that you never got the House of Light on your side. Gods know I would have had a priest standing at my side at every session of the court, if I could have found one willing.”

I hadn’t, or rather there’d been plenty willing to attend but none as my open backer. It’d been enough of a headache to find someone in good standing willing to anoint me as Queen of Callow, and I was still half-convinced that I’d only found takers because

it'd been an open secret at that point that Praes and Procer were looking at the borders with hands on their swords.

"They courted me early in my reign," Cordelia admitted, "but what they wanted of me I was unwilling to give."

I raised an eyebrow.

"The seat in the Assembly the lost after the Liturgical Wars?"

Seemed like the likeliest prize. It'd been part of the bait that Scribe had used to get Holies to back the coup against Cordelia, a promise of restoring it made in Rozala Malanza's name.

"They were not so bold," the fair-haired princess chuckled. "They wanted me to exert my influence to make an exception to the foundational possession laws for the House."

I squinted at her, trying to remember what those were. I'd actually heard about those, Pickler had praised them in a report because of how easy they made it to build defensive bastions.

"Right, Lycaonese princes have different rights," I said. "No one can own land in your principalities except for the royal line, everyone else is renting."

"It is a little more nuanced than that," Cordelia said. "Some lands have been held in the trust of certain families for centuries, with written treaties between our royal lines and theirs that prevent revocation without certain conditions."

"So the priests were pissy about having to pay rent for their temples," I said, amused. "And you told them to stow it and keep paying."

A less generous woman than I might have called the expression she made at that a moue.

"The Holies wanted the right to hold lands and raise sovereign monasteries, as they do in southern principalities," Cordelia said. "I explained to them that the refusal to parcel royal rights goes back to the rule of the Iron Kings and is considered sacrosanct, but the frustration at being unable to secure a northern foothold is an old one."

She elegantly shrugged.

"Our relationship significantly cooled after that, though it was never outright hostile until events boiled over during the coup," the princess finished.

I grinned.



"And for that little piece of work you got to rip their fangs out," I said.

Vivienne had watched with attention and more than a little relish as the wealth and land of the Proceran House was methodically dismantled in the wake of that mess, noting that they priests even had to pretend to be grateful since she wasn't coming down on the actual people – it was the riches, the properties and the trades, that Cordelia had confiscated for the good of the war effort. In the years to come, the House of Light across the Whitecaps would find that it had a lot less coin to throw around when it wanted to get its way.

Like Vivs, I was already looking forward to the furious shrieking.

"It was only a matter of time until another First Prince did the same," Cordelia demurred. "Besides, your own religious adventures are rather more interesting."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"The House Insurgent is all you too, Hasenbach," I drily said. "I wouldn't have gotten so many firebrands on my side without the Tenth Crusade knocking at the gate."

"I meant a different sort of religion, First Under the Night," the princess amiably said.

"Eh," I shrugged. "The Crows and I came to agreement, that's all."

"There has been a great deal of speculation as to how you became high priestess of Night," Cordelia delicately hinted.

I rolled my eye at her.

"You can just go fishing openly, you know," I told her. "You've already made your oaths."

Hesitation. How rare for her to wear it so openly.

"Even though," Cordelia carefully said, "I yet hold the key to the ealamal?"

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I really wish you'd smash that thing over your knee. But yeah, holding that doesn't mean you don't get your seat. In case you hadn't noticed, people having held – or holding – knives at my throat doesn't really disqualify them from sitting in my council."

"The Doom of Liesse's continued existence does indicate a degree of flexibility on your part," she conceded.

*Sure, I thought, flexibility. Let's go with that.*

"So what is it that you're actually curious about?" I asked, changing the tack.

"Much," she drily said, "but most as to how you successfully convinced Sve Noc to appoint you their high priestess. Rumours run wild, from your having triumphed over them to your souls having been melded."

The last one was actually not entirely untrue, which was a little disconcerting to consider.

"I headed for the Everdark after the talks went south in Keter," I said. "By then it was clear that Malicia and the Dead King intended war, which weakened your position, but my armies were battered and I was without allies. The Firstborn were the only Evil polity left, which made them pretty much the only candidates for getting help."

"So you did not intend priesthood from the start," Cordelia said.

I snorted.

"I thought I'd make a bargain with the Priestess of Night, not even knowing she was actually a they and not Named in the slightest," I said. "Only that went out the window almost immediately. Firstborn don't really negotiate with humans, and the Sisters were a lot more interested in Winter than anything I had to say. Besides, the Everdark was falling apart even without the dwarven invasion I arrived just ahead of. It was a fucking mess, Cordelia."

"Not the worst position to bargain from," she mentioned.

I grimaced.

"Winter," I admitted, "kept me frozen in the aftermath of one of the worst days of my life. I wasn't thinking as clearly as I could have. So after I realized I could make my own sigil and bestow fae titles, I struck a bargain with the Herald of the Deeps for the destruction of Sve Noc in exchange for the right to bring any drow following me to the surface as an army."

Utter surprise, though smoothed away quickly.

"You *fought* them?" Cordelia asked, leaning forward.

"I did," I said, "and they gutted me like a fish. I lay down on the ground to die, down there in Great Strycht, and only survived because they needed me to finish eating Winter. If Akua hadn't saved me then, Sve Noc would have slurped me up like tepid gruel."

I did enjoy the faint look of disgust she made at that lovely image.

"We had a shot at turning it around on them, after, but I'd had Winter ripped out of me by then," I said. "And I felt... freer for it. It'd broadened my perspective. So instead of continuing to fight like bears in the pit, I asked for their help."

I grimaced.

"Begged, really, when it came down to it," I admitted. "Because it was the only way out that wouldn't irreparably fuck one of us: someone being willing to lose, willing to bet on trust before it'd been earned."

She studied in silence, for a long time, and I felt uncomfortably naked under her gaze.

"Trust," she softly repeated. "It always comes back to that, does it not?"

"They repaid it in full," I said. "I've done a lot of things I regret over the years, Hasenbach, but that night in the deeps will never be one of them."

Blue eyes considered me.

"You call me both Hasenbach and Cordelia," the princess said. "Do choose one, Catherine, the irregularity grows irksome."

"That an invitation?" I teasingly said, cocking an eyebrow.

She met my eyes.

"It is," Cordelia frankly said.

I cleared my throat, surprised and a little embarrassed.

"All right," I croaked. "Cordelia."

Shit, I'd called her that before so why was using the name now making me feel like blushing? A change of subject was in order.

"I'm told you're sitting down with a lot of sigils," I said, perhaps a tad gracelessly.

She looked faintly amused but let it pass without comment.

"I have been trying to discern," she said as she tucked back her braid, "what lies ahead for the Firstborn."

My gaze sharpened.

"You want to know what kind of a neighbour Procer will be getting," I said.

"I love the Principate and always will," she admitted, "but in this I must embrace a broader perspective. When the war ends, Calernia will not be the same land it was when it began. What is it that the Firstborn seek as people, what are their needs and hatreds? I would understand, before negotiating the treaty with Sve Noc, what the place of the drow is to be in the coming centuries."

She was, I thought, probably the only ruler in the west that was actually pursuing that line of thought. There was a reason she'd made for a dangerous foe.

"And what did you find out?" I idly asked.

"You do not rule these people," Cordelia replied, blunter than was usual for her. "You are considered a manner of prophet, a religious symbol, but power is in the hands of the Ten Generals and the most powerful sigils – under the vigilant gaze of Sve Noc."

"My place as First Under the Night is temporary," I acknowledged. "I was appointed to guide the Firstborn in their settlement on the surface and serve as a vessel for necessary reforms, but I'm not meant to stay in the seat. I'll be surrendering the title at the end of the war, like all the others."

All except the last, the one that lived under my skin.

"You have steered them to a strong diplomatic position," Cordelia acknowledged, "but I fear that situation cannot last."

"You think they'll make themselves into a problem after the war," I said.

"The most troubling issue is that drow do not trade," she replied. "There is some barter, admittedly, but no coinage and no merchant class. Their society is turned towards subsistence and war, with few other pursuits."

"So Procer's stuck with a neighbour that's more interested in the Night gained through raids than anything that could be had in peace," I summed up.

"Building Serolen has already begun changing them," Cordelia noted. "That much is clear. Though Mighty keep to strict sigil divisions, nisi and dzulu living side by side wane in that perspective. I expect the tendency will end in larger sigils founding their own cities and sigil loyalties turning into city-state loyalties. By then, the needs inherent to feeding a city

will ensure the development of some sort of internal trade – and thus a form of coinage and industry.”

I hummed, not disagreeing. I doubted it'd be anywhere as clear-cut as what she was describing, but I didn't disagree with the thrust of the prediction. She underestimated, though, how much Night mattered to drow. War would always be a central part of who they were so long as the prize was there for them to fight over, no matter the other pressures.

“That form of the Firstborn state should prove a welcome trade partner to Procer,” Cordelia said, “and so change the balance of power on Calernia indirectly – with less pressure from the north and northern principalities growing wealthier from the change, the Principate's energies will likely turn towards the Free Cities.”

“Basilica will have,” I mildly said, “very little tolerance for that.”

“There will be war,” Cordelia frankly said. “Not in our generation or the one after that, but in time it will happen. My hope is that the framework of the Grand Alliance will keep that war local and contained.”

Optimism, I thought, but then I thought it was much too early to make predictions about what after the war would look like.

“So,” I said, “your issue isn't with the drow in the long term. It's how they'll be during the...”

“Growing pains,” she delicately suggested.

I snorted, but if the shoe fit...

“You're afraid they'll burn bridges before settling down,” I pressed.

“It is the nature of the beast,” Cordelia grimly said. “Before there can be city-building and trade, there needs to be an accumulation of wealth and food. Since you've taken measures to restrict the strength of the Mighty-”

I gave her a very innocent look that she did not buy in the slightest.

“- then it will not be achieved by a sigil accumulating an overlarge amount of nisi and working them as effective slaves,” the blonde princess said. “Given that the one resource the drow will have in abundance is skilled warriors, that leaves acquisition by force as their path forward.”

And the Firstborn weren't fools, we both knew. They'd not keep raiding each other when the real wealth was south and still recovering, poorly defended.

"You can get ahead of that," I said.

"I will recommend that First Princess Rozala do so," Cordelia frankly said. "Lending the expertise of our merchants and farmers after some guarantees of safety would only be common sense. But that is, ultimately, a bandage wrapped around a slit throat."

That was, I suspected with an undercurrent of amusement, a Lycaonese expression translated into Chantant.

"There's another way for those warriors to gain wealth," I idly said.

She stared at me with piercing blue eyes.

"So you did foresee it," Cordelia said. "I thought you might have, when you backed the Praesi request to have those orc mercenary companies recognized under the Accords."

"You need them," I pointed out. "Even when we've dealt with Neshamah the undead will remain – they'll just be leaderless, roving bands instead of an army. And you have the manpower to take back the south and most the heartlands, but beyond that? Your armies are the worst off in the Grand Alliance."

"So you would have us hire mercenaries," Cordelia said, tone thick with distaste.

"It's your way out," I said, "and they'll need to be foreign. Procer's blown through its fantassins these last few wars and you won't have the people to spare to fill those ranks again because there'll be a massive amount of land to reclaim."

"And so we hire drow and orcs to claw back our lands," she said, "further strengthening their image as allies and not monsters out of legend while filling the coffers of their fledgling nations."

I smiled at her, though I couldn't lay claim to much praise over this. I had, after all, stolen Hakram's plan wholesale and fitted it to the Firstborn.

"And the goblins?" Cordelia pressed. "Princess Vivienne has already announced that Callow will open its borders to them, which I believe to be your work."

"Don't undersell her," I mildly replied.

She'd not needed any convincing at all, even though we'd both known it would make the Matrons livid.

"There were attempts to poach my sappers, during the fight for Twilight's Pass," I noted. "I expect that now Callow has opened the gates, some of the attempts to bring in tribes will grow more serious."

"You want to make a world where they have roots everywhere," Cordelia quietly said, watching me. "Orcs, goblins, drow. You would drag them out of our bedside stories and give them places at our hearths."

I met her gaze.

"When I was nothing," I calmly said, "they backed me. Not the Matrons, not the Clans, but *them*. The greenskins, the rank and file. And when my back was against the wall, when I was lost and grasping for allies, I went into the dark and returned to Iserre at the head of an army of the Empire Ever Dark."

My jaw clenched.

"I owe them a lot, Cordelia," I said. "And I will pay every drop of that debt back, come Hells or high water."

If I needed to cut out parts of Calernia so the drow fit it better, I would. And I'd do the same for Robber's people, for Nauk's. Hakram and Pickler had found paths and if they needed them seared into the ground, well, it just so happened I was a deft hand with fire. In this, at least, I was yet my father's daughter.

"You have," Cordelia said, "one of the most vicious conceptions of loyalty I have ever known."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"And?"

"I do not entirely dislike it," the princess admitted.

She finished the last of her dessert – a sort of pudding whose main ingredient was, I believed, a kind of fermented algae – and set aside the silver spoon.

"You have my thanks, Catherine," she said.

"What for?" I asked.

"I believe," Cordelia smiled, "that I now know the bargain Sve Noc will accept."

—

Two days later, in the depths of the temple-fortress, a Mighty lost their Night without dying.

Now it was all over except for the violence.

## Chapter 47: Hollow; Hallow

*"And so the First Under the Night asked them this: do you know how to kill a god?"*

– Extract from the 'Parables of the Lost and Found',  
disputed Firstborn religious text

Trokel and Fania made for an odd pair.

The rylleh was wrinkled and wheezing, deceptively slow to the eye but moving with the measured grace of an old killer. The nisi was chubby-cheeked and painfully young, always offering up half-smiles of crooked teeth. It had been very honoured to be chosen as one of my scribes and told me often enough I could repeat the words back with the exact cadence in Crepuscular, accent and all. The dislike between them had been instant, though it was scholarly in nature and not personal. Trokel saw its duty as that of an apostle, squeezing out of my words and actions wisdom for all who partook in Night to follow. Fania was not interested in wisdom so much as stories, on the other hand, and did not write down near as much.

I'd grown, almost against my will, rather fond of their constant bickering. It made me a little homesick, but sometimes a touch of homesickness was good for the soul.

"They can't really be called heretics," Fania insisted, "as they do not deny the divinity of Sve Noc. They simply believe that Loc Ynan is the superior deity."

"That *is* heresy," Trokel informed it, glaring through rheumy silver eyes.

"Not until they've lost," Fania lightly replied. "They have not yet been proved wrong."

"You should have been used for mushroom-feed at birth," Trokel muttered.

"I'm just waiting for you to keel over and die, Old One," Fania grinned. "From nisi to rylleh in a breath, just imagine the songs."

It was almost like I'd been trained to look fondly on a mouthy, playful soul pulling at the pigtails of an opinionated scholarly sort. Gods, I missed Indrani. She had a knack for pulling me out of my thoughts when I got stuck in them, making it all lighter. And Masego missed her too, because I couldn't think of another reason he'd have brought a frankly terrible wooden sculpture of a



duck to Serolen. But he had his work and I had mine, so we soldiered on. Now that the spell formula for the ritual had been created and the groundwork to use begun, we had gone on war footing: it was only a matter of time until strife erupted across the canals, and both sides were moving their forces in place.

Unfortunately for us, we had more than just Kurosiv and their schemes to worry about.

Ivah was seated when I entered the room it used as an office, holed up behind an elegant little Proceran bureau that was painted in bright enough colours that your average Alamans craftsman would have rather hanged themselves than be associated with it. Procerans tended to leave bold colours to banners and clothes, finding them rather gauche on furniture. I waved it down as it began to rise, scribes following behind and bowing almost as low as they did for me, but it insisted on getting up and holding out my chair for me. It had cushions, I noted with pleasure, and given the general drow disregard for those they'd likely been added just for me.

It was the little things, sometimes, but sadly we didn't have time for idle chatting.

"You've got news, I'm told," I said.

The Sisters had already given me vague impressions, but we were in agreement that unless they'd looked at something with their own eyes a report usually better served the purpose of keeping me informed.

"It is so, Losara Queen," Ivah agreed. "From both the southern front and the realm of Procer."

Ah, bad and worse.

"Start with Procer," I said. "At least that one's a disaster I'm used to."

"Arans and Lange have fallen," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "While Aisne buckles under the weight of the enemy, despite a worthy defence and reinforcements from Salia."

And that was only a short respite. The moment the dead digested their gains and raised them as fresh armies, the heartlands would collapse. We'd been aware from the start that the siege of Keter would be as much a race against time as it was a fight against the Dead King himself.

"And the force that laid waste to Segovia?" I asked.

It was the army most worrying me, at the moment. It'd been bogged down by harassment at Segovian hands – they were apt sailors, as

a people, and the Kingdom of the Dead was impotent at sea – but that was never going to last/

“It has burned a swath through Orense but ignored the south of that land,” Ivah said. “Now it marches east.”

Towards Aequitan, I saw after a moment to place the map of Procer in my head. We’d been afraid that the Dead King would just keep pushing south and hit Levant in an attempt to try forcing Dominion forces to return and defend their homes, but I was once more reminded that petty mortal politics were not something Neshamah cared for. Because I could see what he was actually doing, with the Principate’s span laid out in my mind, and it was a fundamentallu different way of thinking. That southern army wasn’t there to win ground, it was there to sweep the south clean of every city of more than ten thousand souls.

That was why he’d ignored the south of Orense, which was sparsely populated because of constant skirmishes with the Dominion.

I could see the trajectory in my mind’s eye. That army would go through Aequitan, then dip south for Valencis and resume east into Salamans. *You’ll even ignore Tenerife at first, won’t you? It’ll be there for you to pick up when you move on the League.* He’d just march the army north, afterwards, into densely populated Iserre, and by then two thirds of Procer would be undead. Neshamah didn’t think of this as war, not really, but though I’d already known that I had never felt it quite as keenly as when I saw traced out in my mind the extermination of Procer.

He was just getting rid of the vermin, sweeping the Principate clean of life before getting to Levant and the Free Cities.

“I took two generations of Callow and garbed them in steel, taking them to die on foreign fields,” I mildly said. “And still we’ll come out of this war the lucky ones. It’s easy to forget that, sometimes.”

I shook my head, clearing it of the dark thoughts. We were not yet done.

“And our front?” I asked Ivah.

The Lord of Silent Steps looked grim.

“There as well the Hidden Horror looms tall,” it told me. “General Radegast caught an army within a Gloom-shard last night and destroyed it to the last, but we lost General Radosa to a pair of demons on another field.”

*Fuck*, I thought. And the Hushed Dread had always been so good at getting out in time. At this point the Ten Generals was turning

into a boast of a title: there were barely any left, and too many of those traitors for comfort.

"Are we still losing ground?" I asked.

In other words, was the city itself at risk? Ivah equivocated with a wiggle of the palm, looking troubled.

"In truth, General Radegast has been going from victory to victory," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "The dead come at us in hordes, relentless but blunt and disorganized. Though we cannot afford to pull back forces, the Guest reports that we have a decisive advantage and a counterattack might drive the enemy out of Serolen entirely."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. *That canny undead fucker*, I thought.

"You see it too," I stated. "That's why you're not smiling."

"I have suspicions," Ivah admitted.

"Then let me lay them to rest," I replied. "Radegast is being baited. The Dead King has been throwing his troops at us so sloppily because he doesn't care about winning the battles. He's keeping the First General stuck south so it cannot intervene here in Serolen."

Because Serolen was how Neshamah handled the drow, not the battlefield. Even if the capital was lost, so long as Sve Noc survived they had the skills to make the snuffing out of the Firstborn a painful, drawn-out affair. Night was exceptionally well suited to irregular warfare, after all. No, the Hidden Horror wanted that messed settled cleanly instead of lingering: either Kurosiv ate their entire race or the infighting between lesser deities broke Night, turning those same reckless attacks into a sudden killing stroke. It was one thing for Radegast to defend with Night, but *without* it?

It would be sheer butchery, an instant rout.

"Spending the dead," Ivah darkly said, "is ever the Dead King's favoured trick."

I grunted in agreement, but my attention was elsewhere. There was something off here, I thought. Instinct had been digging at me ever since we found that tower in the depths of the Relic Grove, but I'd never been able to name it more than restlessness. Unease. Now, though, I was beginning to feel out the shape of something. The Dead King had given out, in one form or another, what was perhaps his most precious secret: the ritual that'd made him. Sure, people who'd studied him or the Kabbalis Book of Darkness – or gone traipsing through Arcadian echoes, like we did

– might be able to piece much of the work together, but Neshamah had given out the *real thing*. For what, a shot at settling the drow more quickly? It'd be a feather in his rotting cap to clean that up early, but that wasn't how the Hidden Horror worked.

Above all things he was patient, and risking giving us a look at the very heart of his godhead wasn't worth the trade. Neshamah always lessened the risks to himself, knowing that every personal loss was a permanent one.

"It's not enough," I murmured. "He paid too much, so he bought something I'm not seeing."

"My queen?" Ivah asked.

I bit my lip.

"He's tried to steal Night before," I noted. "It could be as simple as that."

How hard could it be, for him to ride Kurosiv's mind as he had once ridden Masego's?

"As in Hainaut," Ivah slowly said, trying to follow the tidbits I was speaking out loud. "You believe he may one more seek to take the Night from Sve Noc?"

*But why? Why do you even care about Night, Neshamah?* At Hainaut, when Masego had ruined the Night to prevent the Dead King taking it – the Sisters hiding away the rest within Ivah, tying themselves to it in a manner that made the Lord of Silent Steps my natural successor – I'd believed that the Dead King had wanted the Night as ritual fodder. To get some ritual going. Only he'd proved in the aftermath of that battle that he didn't need the power in the slightest, when he'd opened three Hellgates as retribution to Tariq's sacrifice. So what was it about Night that he cared about?

I knew why I'd come to Serolen, but what did he want badly enough that-

"Oh, *shit*," I croaked out.

Had the Hidden Horror really been that farsighted? As early as Hainaut, when the rest of us were still all stumbling in the dark?

"We are warred upon," Ivah said, and it was not a question.

"I know what the Dead King wants," I grimly said. "It's the same thing I do, just for the opposite reason."

I had come to Serolen so that me might break the Intercessor's hold on Below's stories, breathed life into them. And for that,

Hierophant had told me I needed the true Night. I had come north to find a sword to slay the King of Death with and found him already here, looking for the same blade.

Not to wield it but to lock it away forever.

I rose to my feet, seat scraping against the stone and my staff of dead yew under my hand before I even thought to reach for it. Under the worried gaze of the three Firstborn I paced, my limp full of sudden nervous energy.

"No," I told them, "this is good, actually. It was the missing piece. We know all the pieces in play now. There's just more of them than we thought. Besides, it's still Kurosiv's game when it comes down to it."

"Forever schemed against, we," Ivah sighed, lips thinning.

"Could grow fat off enmity," Trokel finished, looking approving.

It liked its classics, Trokel, and even I had learned a few parts of the Songs of Dust.

"Queen of Lost and Found," Fania said, "may I ask for elucidation?"

I flicked it a one-eyed glance, baring a smile full of teeth.

"Do you know how to kill a god, Fania?" I asked.

The young drow stilled, then stiffly shook its head.

"You make another," I muttered, fingers drumming against the side of my staff.

Yes, it would do. It had the right beats to it, I thought as I stared at Ivah, and a fitting pair of hands.

"Now we can win," I told them. "And when we win, we take it all."

Iva's eyes narrowed.

"The counterattack," it said.

I nodded approvingly.

"We get Night settled properly, focus our forces, and Radegast will have it right," I said. "We can sweep the dead out of Serolen on the counterstroke, with forces to spare."

Enough that I'd be able to take a Firstborn contingent with me to Keter for the siege, which would be a great help. No one did night warfare quite like the drow, and when fighting the dead sieges did not quiet down after dusk. Ivah looked pleased at the

thought of such a resounding victory, but it had never been one to get too excited.

"First we must prevail here in Serolen," my Lord of Silent Steps said. "I trust in your wiles, Losara Queen, but Kurosiv

"Yeah," I agreed, "and we can't afford to wait any longer. Neshamah's a spendthrift in bones, but he's not *that* wasteful. If the attacks stepped up, Kurosiv is nearly ready. We have to go on the offensive right now."

Ivah blinked in surprise.

"*Tonight?*" it asked.

"It's that or giving Kurosiv the first blow," I replied, eye and tone distant. "I just need to figure out the where."

Now that I knew what to look for, I could feel out the thread. The beasts in the pit, the kingdom of Night as the prize with scavengers looming in the shadows, and the story had sharpened. I'd figured out more, so I was seeing more. The pit was there, it wasn't just an abstract anymore. But where? I cocked my head to the side, groping about. It was faint, but it had been decided. Somewhere in the heart of the city, but any fool off the street could have told me that. There was a veil preventing me from seeing more. *Come on*, I thought, gritting my teeth. *I can feel the echo, there's a tie to me*. Something personal. I heard indistinct voices but ignored them, clawing at the veil with my will.

It was like swimming against the current, but I'd done that all my life and I wasn't going to let it stop me now. The Beast leaned over my shoulder, huffing out a laugh like a hundred wails, and as I grinned I felt claws settling over my hand – we pulled down, together, and through the tears glimpsed at the truth.

Stone islets in a lake, nestled against a canal, all covered in sculptures and greenery that glowed in the night. Pleasure ships had sailed there once, passing by enchanted metalwork that sang when touched by the breeze. The Flowing Gardens, it was called, and I knew all this at a glance because I had been there before. I had shed blood there. We withdrew our hand, though not quite quick enough the backlash did not smash right into my face. The Beast was gone in an instant and I was drawn to the here and now by the painful sensation of tumbling on bare stone with a half-broken nose, bleeding from the face.

All three drow had risen in alarm, but as I turned with a groan I began to laugh through the trails of blood.

"That cheeky little shit of a would-be god," I wheezed. "*There*, really?"

I gestured curtly for them to sit back down, pushing myself up.

"Losara Queen," Ivah said. "Have you been attacked?"

"I tugged at fate's tail," I smiled, "and it didn't like that in the slightest."

It only looked more alarmed at that, which only went to prove Ivah of the Losara was no fool.

"It's fine, Ivah," I said. "I know what we need to do now. I know how we end this."

I met its eyes with my own, grinning.

"We're going back to Great Strycht, you and I," I said. "Where we killed and made a god."

And this time, I thought, we'd make it stick.

"The Flowing Gardens," Ivah said, ever quick on the uptake.

"It's where it all ends," I said. "And I know how to get Kurosiv there tonight."

"They will be wary," my Lord of Silent Steps warned.

I chuckled.

"You ever fished, Ivah?" I asked.

"I have not," it replied, looking suddenly reassured for some reason.

"I was born in a city by the Silver Lake," I said, "and in those waters there's a kind of fish called the Laure silverscale."

"Named after the lake?" Ivah asked.

"And the shiny scales," I drily replied. "See, the thing about the silverscale is that it's got a touch of magic to it – eat the flesh not too cooked and it'll grow back your hair even if you went bald. So a lot of old nobles want it, and since there's not a lot of them even a single catch is worth a fortune."

I limped back to my seat, wiped the blood off my face and slumped back down onto the cushions.

"Easy coin, you'd think, but there's trouble," I said. "That touch of magic also makes them *smart*. Wary as all Hells. They

never take bait and they go deep the moment there's a hint of a net."

"So none are caught?" Ivah asked.

"Oh, we get them," I said. "You just have to be patient. If you can't catch them yourself, you let the tide do it for you. They love to nibble at water milfoil, so some clever Laure lad planted a lot near the shore and set a few stones in place before leaving."

Milfoil only grew near Southpool, usually, but then the silverscale itself was believed not to be a native species. Callowan scholars had usually called them a divine blessing on the Fairfaxes since their appearance a few centuries back, but Praesi historians instead noted that they'd only appeared after a failed attempt to take Laure with an army of orcs with gills that'd ended with a lot of alchemy-filled corpses dumped into the Silver Lake.

"So the silverscales swim close, see there's nothing waiting and have themselves a meal," I continued. "And they stay, because there's a lot of it and no one comes. Only when they've got full bellies and they try to leave, they find the tide's come down and suddenly the rocks they swam over earlier are higher than the water."

It was an old trick, that one, older than the kingdoms. It'd just fallen out of favour when nobles had started minding commoners mucking about their shorelines.

"And so the fisherman comes back and scoops them up," I said, "because there's nowhere left for them to go. It's called a weir, and silverscales stopped falling for it but for a while it made our fishermen rich."

"You mean to entrap Kurosiv," Ivah said, meeting my gaze.

"They're hungry," I smiled. "So close to victory they can taste it. So we're going to give them exactly what they want: they're going to *win*."

Until they didn't, but by then it would be far, far too late.

"And Ivah?"

The Lord of Silent Steps met my eye, unflinching.

"Find a yew tree and take a long branch from it," I said. "Bring it to me. And most importantly, do it with your own two hands."

—



I sat on the stone bench, a long branch of yew across my lap and the knife that'd killed my father in my hand. I sat there, alone save for the divine, and carved as the ship drifted down the current.

"You once told me," Andronike said, "that the yew is the tree of death."

Her voice was like a hundred whispers woven, and she a ghost in the night. Her cloak was half a veil, trailing in a wind that wasn't, and the ornate iron mask at her hip the last of long-buried evil. Her silver-blue eyes burned in the dark.

"I will not recount to you," I said, "what I scheme. What would be the point? I hide nothing, and you see much."

"What you ask," Komena said, "goes beyond faith."

Ah, the ring of iron and screams. The spray of blood in the air, full-throated wrath. Steel mail from neck to knee, a sheathless sword at her hip that gleamed blue. Every time I beheld her from the corner of my eye her dark face became a long-fanged skull, gone when my gaze returned.

"Faith, huh," I mused, whittling away at the yew. "Funny thing. Chase it and you'll never find it, have it and you might not even know."

A god on my right, and god on my left. Neither behind me. Not yet.

"Before Kurosiv was known as the All-Knowing, it bore another name," Andronike said. "It was called the *Leech*."

"They will drink the blood of us to their fill," Komena darkly said, the chorus of rage echoing. "This I do not doubt. It is their nature."

"So let them drink," I said.

"We *cannot*," Andronike harshly replied, voice like a lie ruining a life.

"You know you're not truly gods," I said, almost gently. "Not anymore. Too much was ruined. It used to be I heard the echoes in your words because of who you were. Now, though?"

The knife that'd killed my father – that I would see red, forever red, no matter how clean the steel – shaved off another sliver, down to the point. I did not look at them, or need to. They were in me, had been since they made me their herald. It was a tie difficult to explain, one perhaps only Ivah would be able to understand. It had, that night in Hainaut, borne their weight for an hour. Such a thing left marks that never entirely faded.

"You're putting it on, aren't you?" I asked. "It's an effort."

That was what they'd been hiding from me. Why it was Ivah that'd been sent to tell me the failures, why they'd sent me to negotiate with Kurosiv's sigils blind to avoid admitting to another. Ruin and rebellion had hollowed them out, and their godhead was breaking apart. Night itself was, like when I'd reached for it at the bottom of the tower only to find nothing. No wonder Hierophant had been so scornful of their apotheosis.

"It is still us," Komena said, voice tired. "No matter how lessened, Catherine Foundling, it is still us."

I might have thought that an empty boast, a claim that even now they were still divine in every way that mattered, but for the tone. The exhaustion of it. No, she meant something else entirely: *it's all that's left of us, and I fear to lose it.*

"It is not fear," Andronike bit out. "It is concern. You scheme recklessness."

"That is," I replied, "my nature."

"Where is your eloquence now, Queen of Lost and Found?" Komena harshly laughed. "Your silver tongue has yet to appear."

I breathed out, looking at the darkened sky.

"Do you ever think," I asked, "about that night down in the depths? About the choices we made."

Silence.

"Do you regret it?"

My question reverberated across the water, like a mockery of itself.

"No," Andronike said. "I do not regret naming you First Under the Night."

"In this," Komena softly said, "we are yet content."

"I'm glad," I admitted. "We're not..."

I trailed off, the words hard to find.

"You can't be friends with your own gods, I suppose," I crookedly smiled. "But I remember what I saw of you, before I gave up my crown. How you became who you are. And I still see much of myself in you."

Some of the best and some the worst.

"It's not unlike faith," I said. "Because you gave me a gift, that night, that was greater than power."

I thought of that moment in shadowed room, Cordelia and Hanno standing before me. The choice, always the choice.

"You taught me to lose," I said. "And that might be the most valuable thing anyone ever taught me."

The blade paused on the length of yew.

"So please," I quietly said, "let me return that gift to you."

I felt them meet each other's gaze over my head. I did not look, for it was not a moment meant for my eye.

"Heart of my heart," Komena gently said.

"Even now?" Andronike asked, more fragile than I had ever heard her.

"It began with us," her sister said, "it ends the same."

I carved away at the yew, wrist snapping, and left them at it until they fell silent. Only then did they turn to me, leaning over my shoulders. We looked, the three of us, down at what I had made: a spear, a killing point made of death's own wood brought to me by Ivah's hands.

They both stood behind me, now, and no more need be said of it.

"Let's make it," I murmured. "A night worth singing about, you and I."

Their fingers dug into my shoulders, feeling like talons, and my dead eye bloomed anew. Power poured into me, a sea made to fit into a woman's shape, and I saw the Night. All of it. They rode me as the Dead King had once ridden Masego's mind, all of their power at our hands.

Sve Noc whispered, and all across Serolen spears were raised. War, they had ordered.

And we sat on the ship, watching, as violence spread like ink in the water. Our sigils had been waiting, and so had Kurosiv's. The Ysengral smashed through the defences on the riverside, pushing through, but they were drowned in bodies until even the steel walls they had brought were overtaken by the mounds of the dead. To the south our attack was stopped cold, caught in a clever trap and butchered, before Kurosiv's warriors crossed the water to kill and burn. The heart of the city was an orgy of death, the fighting in the maze of ancient wonders so tumultuous that sigils no longer recognized allies from enemies.

We were losing, and all over the city towers of obsidian gleamed. We were losing, and Kurosiv was glutting on our defeat.

So much death, so quickly. The air was shivering with it, Night wafting up like smoke. And as the hour passed, another and another and another, we sat on the slow ship and watched blood trail across stone millennia old. Until Ysengral's beleaguered offensive, forced to a halt, suddenly punched through. The warriors ran for the tower they had been sent after, the reason they had been told they must do or die, and though they ran into entrenched resistance they were still gaining. Loc Ynan after all, had recalled its Traitor Generals.

The offensive on our side of the canal faltered, what had seemed like a promised victory faltering, as a great ice storm bloomed in the heart of the Flowing Gardens. We saw its birth, the scream that reached up to the sky, for our ship had sailed slowly but with purpose. The slender wooden prow touched the shore and I rose, shadows trailing behind me like a procession of shades. It had been a ship like a knife, a single piece of black wood exquisitely carved, and it had brought me to my destination without need for haste or steering.

I took a limping step on the islet of stone, before me a great blizzard and frost creeping across every part the Flowing Garden. I leaned on my staff, my other hand holding the spear of yew, and on the edge of the white death I found Ivah of the Losara waiting, my two scribes at its side. Tall and thin, hair long and pale, but it was the mark on its face that drew the eye: silver on purple, a tree bearing the fruit of two circles incomplete. Losara, it meant. *Lost and found*. The first of the Firstborn to have sworn to me, the first to have seen something worth taking in my words.

*But do I really know you, even now?* The Lord of Silent Steps was as the Firstborn themselves, cast in exile in a new world, and I had to wonder – had the drow changed, or only their circumstances? *Who are you, Ivah of the Losara, when all the noise falls away?*

"A nice night, isn't it?" I idly asked.

Ivah bowed low.

"Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured, then bowed even lower. "Sve Noc."

I cocked my head to the side.

"I have need of you, Ivah of the Losara," I said.

"I serve," it solemnly replied.

I held out the spear of yew, end first.

"Take it," I said.

It did.

"You'll know," I murmured, "when to use it. Until then..."

I smiled.

"Be my shadow," I asked, "one more time."

Ivah softly laughed.

"Always, Lately Queen," it swore.

And I took a limping step forward, then other, until I had passed the Lord of Silent Steps and it was swallowed by the procession of shades. The two scribes watched me with the sort of religious awe that was, deep down, at least half fear.

"Moren Bleakwomb stands within the storm," Trokel said. "Are you to fight it, First Under the Night?"

I shrugged, nonchalant. There was a lot worse than Moren at the heart of that blizzard.

"I'm just going to ask a question," I said.

"A riddle?" Fania asked.

"Oh, nothing so convoluted," I mused. "The simplest thing in the world, really."

One step at a time, I reached the edge of the storm. The cold, Gods, the *cold*. It was sinking into me already, like apathy eating away at my insides. Whispering about how easy it would be to lie down and die, to finally rest.

"Already tried that," I told the storm. "Fate dragged its feet."

Komena laughed in my ear, sounding delighted. My back straightened and I looked ahead into the blizzard, seeing nothing but somehow knowing that Moren was looking back.

"All you who hear me," I said, meaning every word, "are you worthy?"

*Sa vrede*. The words rang out even in the storm, but no reply came. They were waiting, biding their time. I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"If you'll not give your answer," I said, pulling down my hood, "I'll have to come and take it."

I stepped into the storm, batted about by the howling winds before I could so much as blink my eye, but a hand held my shoulder and kept me anchored to the ground,

"Let us," Andronike said, "not stumble at so late an hour."

One step after another, fighting against the headwind. It was coming for me, frosting even the Mantle of Woe, but the weight of my victories was not so easily toppled. The storm raged, ate at my warmth and my mind, but my soul burned like a black flame. It would take more than this to stop me. And so Kurosiv sent out more, footsteps soundless on the snow and a hunter's eye. Ishabog the Adversary tread the blizzard as easily as fish would swim water, untouched and unhindered, and came at me from behind. It was an exquisite blow, I saw through Andronike's eyes, the perfect amalgamation of the strength of a Might and centuries of skill.

The obsidian tip of the spear stopped a hair's breadth before it could touch the back of my neck, caught by a hand.

"Too slow, Ishabog," the Tomb-maker said, shaking its head. "Always a little too slow. You never learn."

"Rumena," I said, voice echoing with Komena's.

"I listen, Sve Noc," the old drow said.

*"Make an example."*

Ishabog struggled to draw back the obsidian spear, but the Tomb-maker held it in place. It laughed, the stone under the snow beginning to shift under out feet.

"I obey," the Tomb-maker replied, and then glanced at me. "Losara?"

I glanced in acknowledgement.

"When you find the Leech," Rumena said, "tell it this from me: *this makes eight.*"

The Sisters thrummed with vicious amusement, so I accepted the trust with a nod.

"Arrogance," Ishabog spat.

"True," Rumena said. "Why else would anyone believe they can kill me?"

A scream of fury was its answer, but as the ground rumbled and Night flared I left the Mighty behind. The blizzard barred my path, no longer a blind thing but instead a living malice, and I found my steps slowing. Moren Bleakwomb was narrowing its power,

strengthening it where I stood. Stone shattered, the air bit at my throat and my hair threaded with ice. Even the flame of Night burning beneath my skin felt the touch of that. I stopped.

"Enough," I said, and raised my arm.

Fingers extended, I reached for the wind and felt it filter through my fingers. Only it was something deeper I was looking for, and the thousand eyes I bloomed in the Night I found it. Threads of power, threads of Night, pulling at the strings of this city-breaking calamity.

"It's just a Secret, Moren," I said, and my fingers closed around a thread. "And no matter how bleak your storm, my hand can **Silence** it."

I was the fucking Warden, who did it think it was? My blood sang and like a sickness in the blood my aspect seeped into the thread of power, tainting it. From string to string it moved, until it had contaminated the entire maelstrom, and I bared my teeth as Andronike's gentle fingers on my chin turned me to face an unseen silhouette behind curtains of white. I drew back my hand and slowly, mockingly, snapped my fingers.

The storm died.

The winds were snuffed out, the power gone, and a sudden and terrible silence fell over the Flowing Gardens. All around us, as far as the eye could see, snow began to fall with almost sacrilegious gentleness. The softest of powders, and through that tender rain I met the silver eyes of Moren Bleakwomb. I took a step forward and the tall, haggard scarecrow of a Mighty stared at me, something like terror in its eyes. Another step and it flinched. A third and it backed away. A fourth and it reached for the Night, only to spasm and let out a scream. Every drop of power was gone, vanished like smoke.

Kurosiv was cutting their losses, unwilling to let me harvest their strongest Mighty.

I limped through the carpet of snow, boots crunching, as Moren spasmed violently on the ground. It only ceased when I was mere feet away and wormed around to stare at me with abject fear. Legs still shaking, it began to crawl away. The butt of my staff touched the middle of its back, and it went still as a stone. I leaned forward, Komena demanding death in my ear.

"Do you really think," I quietly said, "there's anywhere in the world that would be far enough?"

"Finish it, *cattle*," Moren rasped back.

I caught it by its bedraggled hair, dragging it until it was looking up at the falling snow. Its breath caught in its throat at the sight.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes," it rasped, voice raw with a grief too ancient for me to understand.

And as the eerie beauty filled the eyes still, I killed Moren Bleakwomb. That was the most mercy I had in me to offer the ancient drow. Neck broken, it dropped into the carpet of white it had sown and I turned away. The dead would keep. Before us, at the heart of the storm I had silenced, a would-be god awaited my coming. It would not do to keep them waiting, and so I answered the invitation hanging in the air. Limping through the trails of pale falling from the sky, I reached a small islet upon which a throne had been raised. Whatever else might have adorned the stone was gone, ripped away, leaving only the sight of Kurosiv the All-Knowing, they who called themselves Loc Ynan, to greet us.

I reached for the pocket sown inside my cloak, frosted fingers closing around my pipe, and found a packet of wakeleaf as Andronike sniggered against my neck. Under the unblinking gaze of the monster that would devour their entire race, I stuffed my dragonbone pipe and lit it with a pass of my palm. I breathed in deep, venting the acrid smoke through my nose, and let out a little sigh of pleasure. Why be mortal, if not for the little pleasures?

"I have to say," I mused, "all stuff aside, I've gotta give it to you that you look like a proper fucking villain."

The All-Knowing was taller and larger than any Firstborn I had ever seen, and for all that the impression was of slenderness for the good proportions their limbs were easily thick as two of mine and their neck a forest of black veins. They wore a tunic of sculpted obsidian from neck to thigh, with pauldrons shaped like dragons biting down on mouthful of emeralds, and their ribs had been traced in molten gold – dripping down as if it'd been paint. Their legs were covered in slender trousers of dark cloth, covered by greaves of bone and gold whose emerald settings had been carved into the likeness of a hundred eyes.

Yet none of it was as striking as the face, which the darkest I had ever seen of any drow and set with pure silver eyes. The sigil of the Kurosiv, two straight vertical lines and above them a crescent moon facing upwards, had been set in molten gold instead of facepaint. The lines begun under the eyes, the moon above black brows. Their dark hair, long and smooth and gathered into a long braid down their, ended wrapped around an egg-sized



emerald. Across its lap a single-edged sword of obsidian waited unsheathed, a wicked shard without even a guard.

"Catherine Foundling," Kurosiv All-Knowing replied, their Lower Miezan in a pleasant Laure drawl. "You come to me bearing gifts in my moment of triumph."

I breathed in deep and spewed out a stream of smoke.

"Is that," I calmly said, "what you think this is?"

"I have waited so very long," Kurosiv gently said, "to take from the failures riding your shoulder. More years than a creature of your kind could hope to understand."

"Hey, just for me," I drawled, "could you maybe say that this is all going just as you planned?"

"None of that, Warden," Kurosiv smiled, revealing sharp filed teeth. "I was warned about you. No games, not now. I even set out Moren for you to use your aspect on."

*I know, I thought. That's what the entire point of that raid on the Shrine of Tears was, isn't it? It's not like the victory really won you anything. You just put Moren in my way so I'd fixate on it as my opponent.*

"Damn," I grinned, spitting out smoke that wreathed my face. "You got me."

"I get *everything*, Catherine," Kurosiv said. "That is my fate."

And in a heartbeat, they struck. A sea of Night came down on my head, an eternity of power turned into some mutable, ever-shifting horror – a million tricks stolen from a million corpses, all of them jaws snapping down at me. I breathed in, smoke filling my lungs, and we struck back. Millennia of desperate deals in the dark, every scrap of knowledge and power the Sisters had gathered in their desperate bid for salvation and ascension. The sea against the sea, enormities colliding.

My bad leg throbbed. That was when it began going badly.

I coughed out smoke, struggling to stay up, and as my knee began to bend Komena's arm slipped under my armpit to hold me up. Kurosiv laughed, still seated on their throne.

"Even now, you might have won," Loc Ynan said in Crepuscular. "I recognize this. Though half-hearted, you are yet mighty. But you always make this mistake, the two of you."

Their eyes burned silver. My knee buckled and Andronike had to slip under my arm to keep me standing.

"You invest yourselves," Loc Ynan continued. "You *lessen* yourselves. And in the end, where does that bring you?"

The sea came down and I hit the floor, the Sisters coming down with me.

"There it is," Loc Ynan almost lovingly said. "On your knees."

My hand went for my sword as I rose, but they were *quicker*. The point of the obsidian blade went through my breastplate and came out my back, the impalement a wave of horrid pain. I let out a wet gasp as Loc Ynan's hand took my shoulder from behind, holding me up.

"Before they called me All-Knowing," the god whispered, "they called me the Leech. And oh, how I have *hungered*."

Night began to pour out of us and into them. Trickle, at first, then rivers. The Sisters fought it and my clouded mind struggled to turn this around, take from Loc Ynan instead, but my feeble attempts were batted away contemptuously. Drop after drop, the Night came to Loc Ynan, and all over the city towers came alive. It was not only Sve Noc's power coming home, but ever scrap of it the Firstborn had ever held. And it was inevitable, what would happen then. I could already feel the malicious god savouring the sight. The Sisters *were* Night, they had left all else behind. They no longer had bodies.

And so they died, one drop at a time.

Komena leaned close to me, fingers digging into my arm as if she were afraid to let go. She went first. Andronike's anguish rippled out and she let out a wail of grief, but she never finished it. The god's face split into an impossible broad smile.

"The worthy rise," Loc Ynan said. "Is that not our rule?"

They laughed. All that was left was ripping out the nails, the last of the meal, and it was all over.

"And so, at last, the Firstborn have made a god."

Blood flecking my lips, I leaned forward into the embrace until my lips were by their ear.

"Mistake," I whispered.

And on the other side of the canals, our towers came alive.

The god went still.

"No," they said.

The flow shifted. The rivers that had fed the apotheosis emptied it.

"No," Loc Ynan snarled. "You insignificant-"

Night gathered, and I could see where. I could follow the threads. An elegant, dark-skinned hand raised its palm up as an orb of darkness gathered atop it. Akua Sahelian, golden eyes smiling, stole the godhead piece by piece. Loc Ynan tried to move, but my hands were tight around them. The sword in my guts kept them close, and we stood there with trembling limbs. What was a god without a godhead? Nothing much, we both knew, and as Night drifted out of our grasp we both fell to our knees. Together, intertwined in my blood.

They were coming. Not only Akua, but Masego as well. I could feel it.

"They couldn't fix it," I told Kurosiv as they let out laboured breaths against my neck. "The Night. They couldn't because their godhead was broken from the start. Even feeding it Winter was just filling a broken barrel."

"It was never power meant for sharing," Kurosiv rasped. "How could you not see that? A single god perfect and eternal, not a million failed ones."

"Do you know how to kill a god, Kurosiv?" I smiled.

They pushed me away and I tumbled into the snow, groaning in pain. I was, once more, dying. But so was Kurosiv, I saw plain as I finally glimpsed their body. It looked ravaged, like it's been hollowed out from the inside. Skin hung loose and the melted gold fell off in flecks, they were drenched in sweat and their breath came and went.

"You fail," Kurosiv laughed. "You still fail, Queen of Lost and Found. You cannot hold the power forever, I can feel it fighting. How long – an hymn, an hourglass? And when it leaves it can only go to me. There is no one else left."

"Ah," I smiled, blood bubbling up my throat. "That's not – ah – that's not exactly true."

Neither of us heard it coming. Why would we? Not without reason had it been named the Lord of Silent Steps. Ivah of the Losara, thrown out of my shadow when Night was taken from me, padded silently across the snow. The would-be god's gaze took in the purple-and-silver paint and flinched, only to stutter down to the size of the spear of yew Ivah held and go utterly still.

"Kurosiv," I gurgled. "Hey, *Kurosiv*."

They flicked a glance my way.

"The Tomb-maker tells you that makes eight," I grinned, all teeth and blood.

They went ashen with rage, but a flicker of movement caught their gaze as Ivah moved – the thrust was perfect, smooth in that way it only ever really was in stories. And the would-be god died, their heart's blood dyeing the length of spear of yew, and as I continued to bleed out I watched Ivah. Watched it kneel, reach at the cooling corpse and draw out the faintest whisper of darkness. The Lord of Silent Steps was a drow, and it had killed.

It held Night, the first of a godhead yet to be.

It held the Night and stood there, knowing it could snatch divinity itself.

*So who are you, Ivah of the Losara, when all the noise falls away?* I had wondered that, in my silence, but there was a question I had asked of it. *All you who hear me, I'd called out before entering the storm, are you worthy?* And Ivah had heard me, dwelling deep in my shadow. But words were just words, and what could they matter when apotheosis was at hand? It was tempted, I could tell. It was the desire of all Mighty, deep down, to become the deity they had served. Silver-blue eyes found mine. My blood was pounding in my ears, drowning everything out, but I still heard every word.

"Maybe tomorrow," Ivah replied.

And it raised its hand above its head, holding up the wisp of Night to the sky, and offered the oldest and deepest prayer of the Firstborn.

"Chno Sve Noc," Ivah of the Losara whispered.

A ripple. Faint, but it was there. The Lord of Silent Steps had borne Night once, borne the weight of gods on its shoulder. It was tied to them still. And in that wisp of Night held up to the starry, snowy sky I glimpsed sisters. *Hello, old friends*, I thought, but my vision was swimming. Darkness was not far away. It was kept at bay, though, by long fingers taking up my cheek.

"Oh, Catherine," a voice soft as silk murmured. "Have you ever won a single thing without bleeding yourself for it?"

I choked on my answer, blood thick in my throat, but I felt lips press against my burning forehead and magic shivered through me. I was not... When had someone taken the sword out of me? Akua helped me up, the softness of her lips burning even more harshly than the fever, and I spewed out blood and bile onto the snow. I felt weak, I thought as I hacked out another gob of blood. Good

enough to stand, but not much more than that. She passed me my staff to lean on, but stayed there for me to lean on. Neither of us spoke a word of it.

Masego stood before Ivah, before the wisp of Night, and in his hands he held the stolen godhead.

"This time," Hierophant said, "we do it properly."

The towers burned in the distance, obsidian melting, and the Hierophant made a god. Days of glyph-carving disappeared into smoke in a heartbeat, Masego guiding the Night through the ritual Akua had made, and as the Night fed into that first wisp it grew. Grew until my patronesses stood before me once, more decked in cloak and armour, but there was more to it than that. The simple weight of their presence was crushing, Ivah falling to its knees until Andronike affectionately raised it up. But there was... The two Sisters suddenly turned to look at Masego, whose face had gone blank, and then at Akua.

Hierophant was looking at her like he'd never seen her before. She was smiling.

"You did something," I croaked.

"So I did," Akua murmured. "I made a decision. A nudge, righting a wrong left to fester."

She paused, meeting my gaze.

"What now, Catherine?"

*Am I a prisoner on a longer leash, those golden eyes for the second time, or am I what you say I am?* I breathed out shallowly. I'd made the decision already, I realized. I'd made it years ago.

"Then I trust your judgement," I said.

Was it grief I saw in there, or love? Or perhaps what I was most afraid of – that, when it came to the two of us, there might not be much of a difference between the two. I looked away. The question burned, but this was not the hour for it.

"It is done," Andronike said, sounding almost disbelieving. "It is truly done. We are returned."

I left Akua's warmth behind, limping forward leaning on my staff.

"All will be Night," I said.

"Aye," Komona said, smiling a hard smile. "And so now we turn to the paying of debts."

They'd gotten Night back, all of it. And they had a proper godhead to bring it to bear. So they did, Creation groaning at the weight of their will.

The Intercessor dropped into the snow like a wriggling worm.

I knew that face. It was the one she'd worn in Praes, Yara of Nowhere. And cursing, gasping, the Wandering Bard twisted around until she was on her back – and saw me cast aside my staff, limping towards her.

"You idiot," the Intercessor screamed. "You fucking idiots."

She backed away but I followed, slowing only to bend down and take up what she had left behind.

"Don't you get it?" Yara of Nowhere shouted, eyes wild. "He's going to kill you all. If you do this, you give the game to him and he's going to-"

I swung, and the lute shattered against her jaw with the most satisfying sound I had ever heard. Strings went flying and she yelped, so I fucking did it again. I hit her until her face was bloody and the lute broken beyond repair, kneeling down in the snow as she moaned in pain.

"You're not even taking my place," the Intercessor spat. "All this, and you're not even taking my place."

"You took my father, Yara," I said calmly, almost conversationally. "Did it with my own hand. So I'm going to take every single thing from you, except what you most want to give me."

I drove my hand into her chest, through the flesh, and reached deeper. It had taken an artefact, last time, but I was further down along the path now. I was the Warden. With a hoarse shout that came as much out of her lips as mine, I ripped my hand clear of her. I left no wound behind, not even rustled clothes, but in my hand I held a sword. Above had been a book, but Below?

I held in my hand the sword that was the stories of Below and smiled down at the Intercessor.

"Run, Yara," I said. "I'll be waiting for you at the end of the road."

I struck down, but the sword cleaved only snow. Panting out my breath, I rose to my feet. The Wandering Bard was gone. It was over.

Or so he wanted us to think.

I turned towards Kurosiv's corpse.

"Did you think," I said, "that I'd forgotten about you?"

Silence.

"Come now, Neshamah," I said. "Do you really think I'm going to fall for that? I know exactly why you're here."

Kurosiv's body jerked upright, still impaled through the heart. Their eyes had gone red.

"You have grown, Catherine," the Dead King spoke through the corpse's mouth.

I limped forward, sword in hand, but almost stumbled. Masego caught me on one side, Akua the other, and together we went.

"You haven't," I replied. "I saw you coming, Neshamah. You came for the stories because you're afraid of what we might do with them."

"Too little," the Dead King said, "and too late. That is what you hold in your hand. You have grown, Catherine, but you have not grown *enough*."

I laughed in his face.

"You were hoping to wait until dawn and steal the Night like a thief," I said. "Going through Kurosiv, who's the foundation."

Or wait longer, if Kurosiv won. Death would see the Night pass to him and he had all the time in the world to wait for it.

"You failed, Neshamah," I said. "Tonight, you lose."

Another step forward.

"There will be no peace," I told the Dead King. "There will be no truce – only the shiver before the blade claims your neck. You will fight and you will rage and you will weep, but in the end there can only ever be one end to this."

And I stepped back, because this was for another to end. When my gaze turned to Masego, however, I froze. Hierophant, I saw as he pushed up the cloth, had his eye back. One was still of glass but the other was flesh and blood, the same brown I'd once known him to have. He leaned forward, smiling.

"We come for you, King of Death," Hierophant finished, relishing every word.

He snapped down his wrist, speaking a single word, and hellflame devoured Kurosiv's corpse whole. And so I saw the second miracle that Akua had stolen away from the godhead, along with the eye. True Night could change souls, it was how the nails had been

made. And Hierophant had lost sorcery because the Saint had severed the part of his soul that connected his body to the power, allowing him to wield it. Akua had healed his soul.

Masego had his magic back.

## Chapter 48: Root

*"Summer's friend, winter's stranger; winter's friend, stays forever."*

– Lycaonese saying

The Flowing Gardens would never be called that again.

The old enchantments here had unravelled, unmade by the greater powers that had run wild across islets and canals. What had been left behind was beautiful in the eeriest of ways. Moren's final winter lingered, the luminescent trees and flowers trapped in ice – forever perfect, forever blooming. A pale carpet of snow that no footsteps could mar remained, sparing only the frozen canals. There the last echo of the ancient songs of the Garden remained, for under a layer of cracked ice water flowed and so the canals groaned out strange hymns that made the heart shiver. And at the heart of it all stood a broken throne, before which we had killed a god by raising another.

Loc Ynan's corpse, scoured clean of the Dead King's soul shard, remained there with a spear of yew through the heart.

It was a hallowed placed, for good or ill, and its beauty was not unlike that of the Firstborn: strange and terrible and keening like a broken heart. I stood among the paleness with an old friend at my side, his eyes – one mortal, one anything but – alight with wonder as he watched the wind thread through his fingers.

"It will snow," Masego said, "every time the moon is full. I can see the echo."

I hummed in agreement. I could feel it too, how tonight would return to this place again and again.

And it was not yet over, for all that we were all bone-tired, keep on our feet only by the strange febrile energy that came of victory and feeling it all coming together. That tonic would fade before long, but we still had a little while in us still. So the two of us, together, watched as Sve Noc embraced the divinity that the Hierophant had forged for them. The night thrummed, as if defiant of the dawn yet to come, and wind like a warm breath rippled across Serolen. I couldn't see it the way Masego could, his eye laying bare the truths of the world, but I trailed down



my finger down the string of the story and smiled. The Sisters, at long last, were slipping the noose.

"Light and Night, huh," I murmured. "Symmetry in all things."

"Their godhead was flawed," Hierophant mused. "Split from the start. What they received they gave out, keeping part for themselves, but that was making a single broken god and a million godlings. The godhead is a trick of perspective, Catherine – it can be shared, but it cannot be *divided*."

So they'd fixed it, he and Akua. Gathered it all together again, dissolving the nails that bound all Firstborn to the Night, and handed it back to Sve Noc to put together into a true godhead. And now Sve Noc, the Sisters and the Crows and a hundred names more, were giving their gift away once more – but not in the same way they once had, oh no. Firstborn no longer held Night, no more than humans held Light: it was outside them, borrowed. Granted by a higher power.

"They won't like it," I quietly said. "Not at first. But they'll get used to it."

The worthy would still take and rise. Night could no longer be taken the old way, because now to harvest it from drow or others grew the Night as a whole instead of a Mighty's personal hoard, but there were still gains. No one had ever quite figured out what defined how much Light individuals were capable of wielding, answers varying from a birth talent to the depth of faith or strength of the body. There would be no such doubt over Night: the more one added to it, the more of it one could wield. As one's power grew, their body would change along the same lines holding much Night had once caused: indifference to age and silver eyes.

Sve Noc would not shortchange those who had fought for them, their loyal Mighty not suddenly faced with decrepitude.

I knew exactly what those changes would feel like because I'd already gone through them. My eye was not silver – not yet – but the rest? There were none, save perhaps Radegast the Guest, who could come close to wielding as much Night as I could. And as for age... I'd once told the Dead King the years would kill me and the old monster had just smiled, before answering – *ah, but how many years would it take?* Many, I knew. Enough that spending eleven years of my life to snuff out the Saint of Swords had not left a visible mark. I was not sure how to feel about having been the precursor to what Night would now grant, the first draft of the work.

"It won't matter," Masego said, openly pleased. "The Sisters have faith, now."

I almost smiled. Someone who did not know Hierophant might have taken that as a spurt of religiosity, but I knew better. He was being quite literal, because when he'd mended Night and guided Sve Noc into rebuilding it he'd done more than just smooth away a few hard edges. He'd fixed it, the flaw. Now it wasn't just a shoddy mantle of power that the Sisters bore and that... changed things. I raised my hand, a mirror to his, but it was not the wind I was grasping. It was threads, millions of them blooming. Night had been born finite, parceled from its very first breath, but that had changed. It was no longer something that could be counted or measured.

I watched the faith, the earnest belief of millions of drow swelling the godhead of Sve Noc, and let out a convulsive laugh. After all these years, all the sacrifices and the despair and the darkness, the two sisters had found the end of their winding road: they'd slipped the noose. The debt of the Firstborn would be wiped clean, the destruction they'd staved off with a loan and then Winter's flesh at last gone for food. They were no longer finite, their godhead a living and breathing truth, and so what did a few measly years mean for them to pay? Faith fed Night, fed its twin goddesses, and like a beacon in the dark their power filled the sky above us.

Sve Noc paid the old debt of the Twilight Sages, returned the years borrowed, and for them it was no different than a sigh. Time meant nothing to the immortal.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

Masego turned to look at me with his mortal eye.

"What does?"

"How does it feel," I smiled, "to be first man in Creation to ever make a Choir?"

Because that was what he and Akua had done, when it came down to it. In Night instead of Light, but that was a shallow difference when it came down to it. Should I call my patronesses angels of thievery and murder instead of gods, what would it change? And that, more than the rest, made it plain the scope of what he'd achieved to night. Because Choirs did not choose a single nation, and single people, and remain bound to them. They were not so... limited. And come morning, neither would Sve Noc be.

I gave it a month before the first goblin was blessed with Night.

Masego considered my words, face pensive.

"Do you remember," he finally said, "what the Queen of Summer said to me, when I tried to throw off her binding in Arcadia?"

After the Battle of Five Armies and One, I recalled, and it took me but a moment to recall the words.

"If you'd had a few years, Masego," I quoted. "You have not seen enough."

He smiled, closing his fingers around the wind.

"If I met her tomorrow," Hierophant simply said, "she would be wrong."

Nothing more need be said.

The two of us stood there, in companionable silence, until dawn came and pulled the final curtain over it all.

—

The First General gilded its patronesses new crown with fresh victories.

Three battles won in a day, Gloom-shards keeping the day's bite away from the Firstborn, and now the dead were on the backfoot. It was a matter of weeks until they were driven out entirely. General Ysengral used the time to purge Serolen of the most egregious traitors – an easy enough task, given that Sve Noc now refused them the wielding of Night – and consolidating our hold on the city. There was no organized resistance to the effort, the second apotheosis of the Crows and Kurosiv's murder having snuffed out any thought of rebellion in even the most hardline of the opposition. It was one thing to deny a god when you had the protection of another, but without that?

Only fools and the mad kept holding their spears, and those were made short work of.

I myself had another duty. I sat in what drow now called Verde Zyebug, the Garden of Dead Gods, and told the scribes of the Losara of what had happened. Not all, for some truths were better left buried, but enough. We sat among the snow whose cold never seemed to reach my bones and spoke, until day turned to night and day chased it away. I left the Garden exhausted, leaning on my staff, but there was more yet. My presence was required, for Cordelia Hasenbach had finally sought her audience with the Crows. The deal she had come to Serolen to strike was to be unveiled at last.

I limped my way to the temple-fortress, returning to the depths, and stopped by my quarters loon enough to wash. It was with fresh clothes and wet hair, still half-combed, that I made my way to the war council room where the princess would be allowed to make her case. I was, I found with mild amusement when I entered, the last to arrive. Two crows were perched on the back of my throne,

so even the goddesses had gotten here before I did. Declining to apologize, I limped across the room and settled into my seat. On my left was Ysengral, and on my right Rumena – neither of which looked particularly interested in what Cordelia Hasenbach, standing before us straight-backed, had to say. She had won some respect by fostering the civil war among Kurosiv's sigil, but in the wake of our more recent victory that counted for less than before.

"Princess Cordelia," I said. "As First Under the Night, I grant you audience in this hall."

The fair-haired woman bowed, as was the etiquette. My words were pretty much a formality, given that though I had the highest status of the mortals in this room in practice it was Rumena and Ysengral that ran Serolen – and the Sisters who had the final say on agreements with Procer. I suspected that Sve Noc would take a step back as the years passed, distancing themselves from earthly affairs, but it would wait until the storm had passed. I felt a flicker of approval from Andronike.

"I thank you for the privilege," Cordelia calmly replied, straightening. "I come on behalf of First Princess Rozala and the Grand Alliance to offer treaties to the Empire Ever Dark."

If this were a Proceran court that'd be the part where we moved to a more comfortable setting, but that wasn't the way of things in Serolen. She'd be standing through it all while we sat, which I felt bad about but not enough to start standing on my bad leg. I flicked a look at Ysengral and gestured it could start speaking, letting the negotiations begin. In Chantant, since Hasen- Cordelia spoke no more than a few sentences of Crepuscular. The start of it was nothing unexpected, reaffirmation of the alliance against Keter and Rozala 'expressing her firm belief in the importance of our friendship' through her envoy, but then we got to the parts that mattered.

The promise to balance: Keter had been promised to the Herald of the Deeps for his support and to the Firstborn for theirs. It could not be held by both.

"You are not asked to cede lands that were promised to you," Cordelia plainly spoke. "The Kingdom of the Dead remains yours, whatever else is said today, and our talks concern only the acquisition from your empire of the Crown of the Dead as well as surroundings."

A map had been drawn and was now brought forward, one I'd seen before – it was the one the Herald had agreed with. The city of Keter and a significant but not particularly large amount of land around it were marked out. Enough farmland that the city could be fed without needing imports, that had been the calculation made. After we got all the poison out of the ground, anyway. Pretty

phrasing on Cordelia's part, I thought, casting this as the Grand Alliance buying a claim from an ally instead of offering it to someone else. The Sisters were not so easily swayed, but presentation mattered if you wanted to keep trust.

"And why," General Rumena bluntly said, "should we care to cede a single thing to Procer? We have bled for every inch of that claim."

And now the moment of truth came, as I had genuinely no idea what Cordelia would bring forward. She'd been having trouble finding a price, I'd known that, but our last conversation had seen her declare she'd found it. She started out predictably enough, offering on behalf of Procer things the Firstborn would need after the war: seeds for fields, cattle to begin herds and goods made in Proceran cities. Neither Rumena nor Ysengral were sold, I could tell from their presence in the Night. They knew they could get all those things without needing to cede territory. But that had been the prologue, and then she got to the meat of the offer.

"You have been asked to bleed for the west," Cordelia acknowledged, eyes sliding to me for a moment before looking away. "To make sacrifices for human kingdoms few of you have ever seen. And none have ever paid you back for the losses, save in promises now bargained over."

"How can the word of humans be worth?" Ysengral scorned.

It did not bother to exclude me from that, but I didn't take offence. Mighty Ysengral was one of the Firstborn who believed that my being First Under the Night meant I wasn't human, not in the ways that mattered. Maybe not drow either, but far from cattle.

"I do not blame you for the mistrust," Cordelia said. "It was earned. And yet we need the Kingdom Under if we are to win against the Dead King, so sacrifices must be made."

Neither of the generals were pleased to hear that, and truthfully neither was I.

"So let Procer pay its share," the blue-eyed princess said. "We ask of you to cede territory, and so we offer to cede the Empire Ever Dark territory in turn."

I hid my surprise, feeling that of the others. Even Sve Noc. The map she brought forward this time marked the territory she proposed Procer was to cede and the sight of it had my eyebrows rising. It was a third of the Principality of Cleves, namely the northern third. Coastlands and rocks, little land good for farming, but if we *won* the war? The city of Cleves was in there, a natural harbour near the crossroads of the Grave, the Tomb and Lake Pavin. A natural harbour at the end of well-kept roads going

south. *It's going to be one of the trade centres of Calernia in the coming decades*, I thought. *One of the richest cities on the continent.*

And there lay Cordelia's cleverness. Because she was giving away something hugely valuable, but for it to be valuable there needed to be trade between the Empire Ever Dark and Procer. And trade meant relations, meant a measure of peace. And that meant First Princess Rozala would sign the treaty, because peace with the Firstborn would be worth so much more to her than lands she did not hold and were infested with undead.

"A worthy offer," Mighty Rumena conceded.

"You are owed more," Cordelia frankly replied. "The Firstborn have stood by Procer in its darkest hour, dying by the thousands so that our realm might survive. And so I would return that pledge."

I leaned forward.

"On behalf of the Grand Alliance, I would offer this treaty and oath," the blonde princess said. "So long as the Grand Alliance and the Empire Ever Dark stand, I pledge that the full might of the Grand Alliance will be mustered in the defence of your empire in the face of any attack by the Kingdom Under and its vassals."

Ah, I smiled. *So that's what you figured out*. Loyalty. From our talk, she had decided that what the Empire Ever Dark really wanted – really needed – was a guarantee that never again would they be forced into another exodus. That never again would they stand against the dwarves without allies, without an alliance spanning half of Calernia and willing to make a fucking ruckus on their behalf. Cordelia kept talking, delicately making it known that the pledge would be written to stand even if members of the Grand Alliance had been suffering raids, but I was already leaning back in my seat with a pleased sigh.

I already knew how this would end.

—

I had not slept in too long when I found her.

It added a haze to all I saw, as if the edges of the world were blurred. Her, though, I saw clear as day. Akua was seated on a worn old paving stone that must've been ripped out of the street, looking at an altar that could not be more than a day or two old: a simple tile of ceramic, on which two crows had been painted in black. It was faint, but I could feel the power in there. Honest faith had been offered up to that tile, the kind that left ripples behind. And Akua Sahelian's golden eyes watched the altar with a distant look, the long skirt of her black dress draped

about her seat. Cloth-of-silver drew the eye to her waist and only a single small pin kept her hair in place.

She was a vision, I thought, though of what I could not quite find the word for.

"Thinking of converting?" I asked.

An amused glance was flicked my way.

"Are the perks worth it?" she lightly asked.

"Eh," I shrugged. "I've seen better."

I felt the Komena's indignation echo from a distance, which only improved my mood. Akua chuckled, running her fingers gently across the dried paint.

"It is not a small thing that we did," she said. "In some ways, it might be the most consequential action we ever undertake."

"Ending Keter will beat that," I said. "Hard for Night to matter if there's no one left to use it."

She conceded the point with a nod but did not look entirely convinced. She wasn't entirely wrong, either. Keter had been beaten back before, but what we'd done here with the Night? It didn't really have a precedent, as far as I knew. It was just that this war with the Dead King wasn't like the others, even if it was hard to understand. Neshamah was laying it all on the line, this time, knowing it was the best shot at winning he'd ever get.

"How did dear Cordelia's talks go?" Akua idly asked.

I hummed.

"She's convinced them," I said. "Now all that's left is shaking hands with the dwarves."

"A most convincing woman, Cordelia Hasenbach," she mildly said.

I cocked an eyebrow. That hadn't entirely sounded like a compliment.

"That something you mind now?" I asked.

An assessing look, then she for some reason she looked satisfied.

"Not so long as she doesn't overstep," Akua vaguely replied, then offered me a smile.

I frowned at her, unsure what exactly that was supposed to mean. She thumbed the painted crows one last time, then withdrew her hand.

"Are we to depart from Serolen soon, my heart?" she asked.

"Two days at most," I said. "I am to... speak, before we go, but we will be marching on Keter with reinforcements after."

By now, the siege should have begun. And there were only a few days left before the Hellgates opened, not that I was too worried about that. Amadeus of the Green Stretch had, once more proving his mind was a steel trap, found a way out of that horror that was more than simply closing the gate. I'd ordered his legacy to be seen through to the end, and it would be. Akua nodded, eyes lingering on me.

"You did not come to tell me this," she stated, as if she knew it to be a fact.

I grimaced. Sometimes it still surprised me how well she could read me. It had snuck up on me, the way she'd become one of my closest friends. It might be a nightmarishly complicated thing, this relationship, but it was no less deep for that.

"I wanted to see how you are," I admitted. "Now that it's done."

She'd held a godhead in the palm of her hand, for a moment. And bent it to her will. But when she chose to use that power, what she'd done with it... I'd known Masego was her favourite of the Woe, but I'd not seen what she did coming. And even now, it did not feel entirely like a personal decision.

"How lightly you have learned to tiptoe in your old age, dearest," Akua drawled.

I grunted in displeasure.

"Fine," I said, eye turning to the crow-adorned tile. "You made a decision, that night."

Healing a friend over godhood. Once more lending her hand to a ritual that would change the world.

"Do you still stand by it?"

It was one thing to choose in the heat of the moment. But night's veil had passed and been replaced by the cold light of day. Akua did not answer at first. I snuck a glance at her and found she was staring at where I'd stopped: the crows on the tile.

"You told me once," Akua said, "that nothing could ever even the balance for the Folly."



I nodded, but she didn't see.

"Yes," I got out.

"I didn't really understand, then," Akua admitted. "I saw one hundred thousand lives and thought it was a heavy debt, but not beyond settling."

She breathed out.

"I learned differently in Praes," she murmured. "I saw..."

She fell silent.

"It ripples out," I murmured.

Those full lips stretched mirthlessly.

"It ripples out," Akua softly agreed. "More was lost than lives that day."

She looked down at her hand, clenching her fingers.

"It is not a debt I can repay," she said. "Not even should the rest of my days be spent on the labour. And so, for a time, I thought to do away with the thought entirely."

"And now?"

She hesitated.

"I like him," Akua confessed. "Masego. He reminds me of my father in a way that doesn't sting."

"So you wanted to help him," I said.

"All it took was a nudge," she mused. "I had the knowledge for it, and I was in the right place – at the right time. I felt so easy that the real question was why I *shouldn't* do it. And that was when I saw it, Catherine."

Golden eyes turned to me.

"It's not about whether the debt is repaid, is it?" she asked. "It never was."

She laughed, a little bleakly, and my heart clenched at the sound of it.

"It's about whether you're the sort of person who'll try," Akua said.

I licked my lips.

"Are you?"

"I don't know," Akua Sahelian admitted. "But sometimes, I want to be."

—

Fifteen thousand. That was the sum of the reinforcements that Sve Noc had agreed to send south to the siege of Keter, though more might follow if Radegast's victories continued to rack up. I was grateful they could rustle up that many to spare, after the rough year Serolen had suffered, and did not hide it from my patrons. Even more of a boon was the Might meant to lead the expedition.

"I swore in Iserre, Losara Queen," Mighty Rumena reminded me.

"Before nine years have passed," I muttered.

"Keter's gates will lie broken," the old drow finished. "I will keep not break my oath."

"It wouldn't be the same without you," I honestly replied.

The sincerity seemed to take it aback, which was rare enough I rather enjoyed it. Beyond the mustered sigils, though, there was another duty left to me in Serolen. Much had happened in the city since I came, and though in time the words set down my scribes — which would follow me south, as part of the Losara contingent under Ivah — would spread among the people, there was a need for a more settled conclusion. An end to the journey that had begun on the outskirts of the Gloom and taken us all the way here to Serolen, the entwining of my fate with the Firstborn's coming to the end of the road. All we had left now was Keter, but I owed more than that before my mantle was passed to another.

And so the Firstborn gathered to the Garden of Dead Gods.

A tide of grey flesh as far as the eye could see, from the lowest of nisi to the heights of the Ten Generals. One hundred thousand, two? I could not tell, and the Sisters whispered in my ear that it didn't matter. I was First Under the Night: sooner or later, all drow heard my words. I had not needed to carry word north of the reforms of Iserre for them to bear fruit. So I stood before a people not mine — sometimes close, but never quite — and leaned on my staff. The eyes on me were not only those of the few, the Mighty, but of all who dwelled in Serolen. How many of these nisi and dzulu had never so much as caught a glimpse of the First Under the Night before today?

It was not my place to fix these people, to mend their broken pieces. I did not understand them enough for that, and even if I did would they want the meddling of my hand? No, I had been chosen as the herald of the Crows because I was the stranger. The dark mirror through which they could look at themselves, the asker of questions. And that was what I had to offer them, today.

"In the depths of Twilight," I said, "I asked you something."

A pause.

"Are you worthy?"

*Sa vrede*. And that harsh question I had once castigated the Mighty through was no longer simply that. It was a ritual now, now, something that they owned more than me. And Ivah, oh Ivah had made something true of it. Something worth believing in. *Sa vrede*, I asked them. *Cera aine*, the Firstborn answered, as they once had in Twilight.

Maybe tomorrow.

"You have come," I said, "a long way. But a long way yet lies ahead of you."

I looked at the ocean of faces, the shining eyes and those that Night had not yet silvered.

"So I must ask you," I said. "Who do you want to be, children of the Ever Dark?"

I looked behind me, at the god slain with a spear.

"Will you reach for the Heavens with hungry hands?" I asked. "There is glory in the Old War, let none tell you otherwise. In defiance against the tyranny of the sun."

I looked at the blue sky above, the endless expanse that held so much promise.

"Or perhaps you would take the winding path," I said. "Make accords, raise stones. There, too, there is glory – in casting aside the old empire to make one greater. To conquer peace as you have conquered war."

My one-eyed gaze swept them.

"I ask you again, children of the Ever Dark," I said, voice echoing. "*Who do you want to be?*"

Some answered, words or curses or oaths, but they were few and one answer was louder than all the rest: silence.

"That, too, is an answer," I gently told them.

And not a bad one. Ignorance was a blank slate.

"The choices are yours," I told them, warned them. "So hear me now-"

I extended my arms, encompassing all the world around us.

"These are no longer the Burning Lands," I said. "Do not look back, for there is no path there to be found. Your home is here, and so you receive the greatest of gifts: in this strange land, your fate is your own."

I leaned forward, smiling toothily.

"Struggle and rise," I told them. "Struggle and fall. But, above all, *struggle*."

I struck the ground with my staff and the earth shivered,

"Today," I told them, "you have nothing."

Or so little, I thought, that there was hardly a difference.

"But tomorrow? Tomorrow is an empire there for your taking."

They were an old people, the Firstborn, but made young again. Let them not waste that chance.

"So go out into the world, children of the Night, and carry with you my blessing and my curse."

I laughed, and thousands shivered.

"May you ever get what you deserve."

## **Interlude: End Times II**

*"Dread Emperor Heinous led the Legions into the seventy-ninth Hell, and once the devils gathered an army in the face of his incursion he laughed and addressed his soldiers thus: 'Fear not disaster, sons and daughters of Praes, for of all the peoples of Creation it is our birthright alone to ride it as a steed.'"*

– 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)

It was tradition that a flying fortress not be named.

Dread Emperor Sorcerous had later made it into a law that no tyrant had since seen fit to repeal, but the tradition itself was as old as the first large rocks that Soninke sorcerers had raised into floating altars for their people to worship at. To give the constructs names, Alaya had been told, tended to make them... temperamental. Inimical's Boot was the example mages tended to quote at her, which after being given the name had begun accidentally crushing people the emperor disliked with alarming frequency and an even more alarming dearth of explanations about *why* it was doing that.

And so the fortress that Chancellor Alaya of the Confederation of Praes – a name yet to be officially ratified, but now that the Tribes had given ground she knew where the votes lay – rode had not been granted a name, though it didn't stop soldiers and servants from calling it the Limping Sister when they thought no one was listening. The sobriquet was apt enough: the construct was smaller than the three behemoths known as the Old Mothers that'd followed Catherine Foundling west, and of the smaller 'sisters' this one was by far the slowest.

"An imperfection in the central ritual array," High Lord Sargon had told her. "Too much bleed, it lets wind buffet the shields and slow us down."

"And the lights at night?" Alaya had asked, morbidly curious.

"Not ghosts, Your Grace, that is mere superstition," the High Lord of Wolof had been quick to assure her.

Perhaps a little too quick, she'd thought, and she muttered 'probably' she was fairly certain he'd added under his breath had done nothing to reassure her. The uncertainty left her to consider whether being haunted by the giant spiders used to raise the fortresses would be better or worse than being haunted by humans, which sadly was not even the most outlandish question Alaya had been forced to ponder over her many years of rule. That still remained whether or not devils, some of which considered souls a form of currency, should be made to pay taxes over any such gains made within the borders of Praes – and more specifically what the monetary value of a soul should be.

There had been spirited debated over the matter, some of her advisor even noting that if devils paid taxes they might be considered to be citizens of the Empire in some ways, and purely to piss her off Amadeus had returned to Ater with an entire *treatise* about- Alaya's stomach clenched. She heard the sound of the knife sinking into flesh, the small gasp as she stood there helpless, and the orc across the table paused in his sentence.

"Your Grace," General Grem One-Eye said, "is something the matter?"

*I think you'd understand, One-Eye,* Alaya thought. *Better than most, for you loved him too.* But she was not looking for understanding, much less comfort. Life had been breathed back into the husk she'd become so that she might serve a purpose, to serve as the bridge between the old Praes and the new, but Alaya of Satus knew better than to call it a second chance. There was too much blood on her hands for that, too many sins for her to answer for – and at the end of her road, the Warden would be waiting with a sword in hand. So what did it matter, that sometimes she came across a familiar turn of phrase in a report and she choked on a sob? She was not meant to escape the shadow

she had cast, and so there could be no use at all in confiding in anyone.

Not even someone who'd understand.

"No," Alaya replied, tone smoothed into calm. "Please continue, general."

Grem One-Eye slowly nodded, then resumed his report on the estimated timing of the Praesi forces marching to reinforce the Grand Alliance's siege of Keter. Though in principle the private armies of the High Lords had all been disbanded when the soon-Confederation of Praes was founded in Ater, in practice that had not been feasible. Breaking up the armies and reorganizing them under the command of the Black Knight, High Marshal Nim, would take months that they simply could not spare. Instead the commanders of those armies had been temporarily drafted into the Legions as auxiliaries with their forces under them.

The sheer amount of supply trains that had involved was staggering, given that the armies of the High Lords were themselves made up of the armies of lesser lords, and it had been one of the reasons that Praes' armies had been staggered into three waves as they began marching west. Some of the house troops were acclimating to the changes better than others and General Grem was not shy in pointing out those that trailed behind: Takisha's lot were the worst offenders, the High Lady of Kahtan's already loose grip on her many vassals having further weakened since the Fall. Not that the need to acclimate was in short supply, these days.

Grem One-Eye had taken with good grace his demotion from being the senior military commander of the Empire to being a general under High Marshal Nim for the Confederation, but he could not quite hide the lost look that sometimes flickered across his rough face. While he'd been a prisoner the fate of Praes had passed him by, leaving him to emerge into a strange new world where he was not quite certain where he fit.

Alaya could sympathize.

"Warlord Hakram tells us that the Grand Alliance's main host will be arriving on the outskirts of Keter within the week," General Grem concluded, "which puts us in the area of fourteen days behind."

"Evidently it was the right decision to send the bulk of our sappers with Marshal Nim," High Lord Sargon said, offering up a boyishly crooked smile. "It is best that the siege works be in full swing when we arrive."

He'd grown, Alaya thought, into quite a dangerous young man now that his soul was no longer held in a box. Thought outwardly the

High Lord of Wolof was dedicating himself to the campaign against Keter with great enthusiasm, Ime had already picked up on his longer game. He meant to gain acclaim from being instrumental to Praes' contributions to the war: most of the flying fortresses had been raised by Sargon and his cadres of Wolofite mages, or according to Sahelian rituals he'd handed out. Circulating said rituals outside Wolof had been a great gift, and earned him personal regard among mages and highborn beyond the broader gain of having his name associated to every single such fortress.

What he meant to do with the acclaim was still unclear but given the offers he'd already floated to help with the reconstruction of Ater she suspected he was already beginning to position himself as her successor. The people of the capital had long memories and would not soon forget High Lord Sargon Sahelian putting roofs over their heads again. If he bartered his marriage well and remained liked in Ater, well, it was only a matter of courting enough of the greenskin vote for Sargon to serve as the Chancellor after her.

Alaya was not yet sure whether she should help or hinder him. One of many decisions that would have to be taken after the war.

"We have our part to play before lending our aid in the reduction of Keter," Alaya said. "One just as important as securing the foothold, in some ways."

Grim nods all around. Procer was falling apart behind them, but the Hellgates opening would turn what was a slow descent into annihilation into a heedless tumble down the cliff.

"Speaking of," Chancellor Alaya idly said, eyes turning to the last person at the table. "Are we still making good time, Lady Nahiza?"

Nahiza Serrif was not, strictly speaking, a lady – though highborn, she had never been in line for a title. But as one of the most brilliant mages of Praes' last generation, once a rival to Wekesa and Dumisai of Aksum, she was usually granted the title out of courtesy. Not that the sullen, sour-faced old woman had ever cared. She was infamous for two things. The first was her reluctance to ever leave the mage tower she'd won by killing the Necromancer and making his ghoul army eat itself as well.

The second was her genuinely *foul* temper.

"Do I look like a ship captain, Chancellor?" Nahiza grunted. "Find a window and look out, if you're that curious."

High Lord Sargon cleared his throat.

"I'm told we are on track to arrive in time," he contributed.

"Cribbed your cousin's notes to figure that out too, did you?" Lady Nahiza peevishly said.

Sargon was visibly angered by the comment, cheeks reddening, which rather impressed Alaya. It was hard to get under his skin these days.

"Your insinuations," Sargon bit out, "do you-"

"We'll get there in time, don't you worry about it," Nahiza interrupted, addressing the Chancellor. "With a few hours to spare, I'd say. The sister's limp is not so crippling when you figure out how to talk to her, no matter how many meddling boys botch their numbers."

The High Lord of Wolof's expression further darkened, to Alaya's private amusement. The old mage was not the most helpful of this informal council, but she did have a way of making even the most tedious meetings entertaining. Still, better to end this before it got out of hand.

"Then I believe the day's business is at an end and we may adjourn," Alaya pleasantly said. "I will see you all tomorrow."

There was some shuffling around the table as they rose and offered the bow mandated by the new modes of etiquette, save for Lady Nahiza who walked out of the room without acknowledging anyone else. The only time General Grem had commented on it, she'd chewed him out for making fun of an old woman's shrinking bladder and no one had quite dared to call her out on what was most likely – but not *certainly* – a brazen lie. Alaya did not linger, instead taking to the luxurious halls of the flying fortress at a brisk pace with her personal bodyguards following behind.

Even before it had been known that she would travel on this particular construct it had been one of the most comfortable, the entire central bastion having been salvaged from the ruin of one of the fortresses that Dread Empress Regalia the Second had raised for her invasion of Callow. It had been meant as her personal vessel, but never been used – it'd been sabotaged by the High Lord of Kahtan, as Regalia's popularity early in her reign had worried many of the High Seats. They'd wanted to blacken her name a little, unaware that the once-promising empress would be largely remembered for starting the Sixty Years War in the centuries to follow.

It'd since served as a sort of fortified mansion outside Ater for whoever held the Tower and been further touched up for comfort, which had made it a natural pick when the Wasteland was scoured for potential fortresses after the Fall. The suite that Alaya had inherited was almost as comfortable as her old accommodations and near as thoroughly warded, which had been a pleasant surprise



when she made her home there. Still, it was not why she had chosen this fortress out of all the others. The reason for that was just ahead of her, past a door that opened at her bodyguard's knock and revealed a dedicated scrying room.

The mirrors and pools were without the frills and ornaments that their equivalents from the Tower had accumulated over the centuries, but no less functional for them. In truth, given that the Grand Alliance – by which she meant Catherine Foundling, staring down the crowns west of the Whitecaps – had shared some of the improvements on the old scrying rituals that'd been made in the Arsenal. It was not the scrying room Alaya had come for, however, but instead the smaller one attached to it. A glorified cupboard crammed with shelves of scrolls and a desk groaning under piles of parchment, with a single seat held out for visitors.

There Ime sat, hair drawn back into a loose braid and wearing a pair of ivory-framed spectacles. She'd always hated reading in magelight without them, and there was no other lighting in her packed archive room. Alaya turned to dismiss her guards with a glance and a smile, stepping into the room and closing the door before sliding into the seat.

"Chancellor," her spymistress greeted her.

"Ime," Alaya replied.

It was... not the same as it once had been, between the two of them. Ime had betrayed her. Betrayed her to the only person in all of Praes willing to do anything to keep her alive, but it had still been a betrayal. That changed things. Alaya was not one prone to unconditional trust, but there had been few people alive she trusted as much as the woman on the other side of the desk. That the trust had been shown warranted and not with the same act added shades to the act that the dark-skinned woman was not yet sure how to parse. It did not help she could no longer read her spymistress through the means she once had.

**Connect**, like her Name and all her aspects, was gone. Never to come back, if the age lines now touching her once perfectly smooth skin was any indication.

"You have news for me?" Alaya asked.

"Word from Duskwood," Ime agreed. "The Warden has crushed a plot of the Dead King's to steal the Night, dealt with the rebellion within the drow and now marches on Keter with reinforcements."

"How many?"

"Fifteen thousand," she replied. "Many of them Mighty."

A considerable force, especially after nightfall, though these days thousands of soldiers felt like nothing more than drops in a pond. There were only so many battles that could be fought – won or lost – before the numbers began to feel... unreal. Disconnected from the brutal realities of the war on Keter.

"She wasted no time," Alaya finally said. "She can't have been there longer than three weeks."

"Probably less," Ime ruefully said, "but then she's become rather formidable, hasn't she? Little Catherine Foundling, who would have thought."

*Amadeus did.* But then Alaya doubted even he had suspected that his apprentice was to become one of the leading figures of their era – arguably *the* leading figure. There were others just as powerful or as influential, but none who had their fingers in quite as many pies as the Black Queen.

"I never thought she'd make it this far," Alaya admitted. "Even when she returned from the Everdark at the head of an army out of legend, I expected her to stumble in Procer."

"She still lacks polish," Ime frankly said. "She's just very skilled at putting herself in situations where it doesn't matter – and she'll run out of those, come times of peace."

Alaya was not so sure. Of all the traits Catherine Foundling had inherited from the man she'd called her father just in time to murder him, perhaps the one that mattered most was the knack to find talent and bind it to her. *What will it matter that she lacks polish, when her foremost diplomat is Cordelia Hasenbach?* It did not get more polished than the former First Prince, who unlike Alaya had given up her crown with dignity and elegance that could only be envied.

"We'll see," Alaya said, then looked away.

The collection of scrolls was not particularly fascinating, but it allowed her the time to gather her thoughts.

"All that's left is Keter," she finally said. "It will be our crucible."

"If the siege fails, the continent is lost," Ime quietly agreed. "And we've begun building ships in Nok, but it won't be enough even if we hold the Whitecaps for years afterwards. We just don't have the resources or the sailors to get more than a third of Praes across the sea."

If that, Alaya thought, and that was if Callow and the Legions volunteered to die to the lost to delay the advance of the dead. She had seen the numbers, though, and she agreed with Marshal

Juniper's opinion: if Procer was lost, so was Calernia. The population of the Principate was simply too large for any army to have a hope of holding against it once the Dead King armed it and sent it after his enemies. Her lips thinned. She had begun it all, she knew. A desperate bargain made with Keter had given the Hidden Horror his opening to come out of his lair.

It would have happened without her, she knew, for the old monster was a deft hand at convincing others to call on him. But it could not be denied that the pact had been her own, and so she had a share of responsibility in all the deaths that had followed from it. It was a dizzying thought, too large for guilt to truly reach her over it – it was simply too *enormous* a concept for it to be able to feel personal enough for guilt to follow. Oh, and it was a complicated chain besides. Would Alaya have ever struck the bargain, without the Tenth Crusade marching on Praes?

No, and yet how much of Hasenbach's eagerness for that march had come from her own meddling in Procer? Which itself had come out of fear of Proceran meddling in their affairs, and on and on it went without end. There could be no beginning or end to human affairs, save the First Dawn and the Last Dusk. Everything else flowed from those threads, an unbroken tapestry. Yet Alaya had made a decision and now Calernia teetered on the brink.

That was not nothing.

"We must prepare what we can to flee," Alaya said, "but I cannot disagree – there would be no mitigating the death blow that would be defeat in Keter."

"We're sending the largest coalition army in the history of Calernia after the city, at least," Ime noted. "There's never been that large an alliance facing a common foe."

"It only speaks to the truth that we are all desperate," the chancellor grimly replied. "Empress Basilia committed the League because she knows she will be unable to win the war by the time it reaches her doorstep."

She breathed out.

"Let's not pretend that this is anything but a gamble, Ime," Alaya said. "We roll the dice on Keter because at least with a roll there is a chance of victory."

In a more traditional war, there no longer was. That ship had sailed the moment the Proceran fronts collapsed and the dead poured into the heartlands. The odds might be against the Grand Alliance when it besieged the Crown of the Dead, but at least defeat was not writ in stone – and it was the only real chance the nations of the living had to *defeat* the Dead King.

Unfortunately for them all, the Hidden Horror knew that as well.

"He'll be waiting for us," Ime said, echoing her own thoughts. "With all the nastiest tricks he still has up his sleeve."

And that was the stuff of nightmares, though Alaya's own would burn green for years to come.

"He always defends Keter most fiercely during crusades," the chancellor quietly said. "It is the only ground he has never ceded."

"It's the only ground no crusade has ever taken," Ime darkly said.

And so that was their last hope: taking a city that had not fallen in several millennia from the immortal lich that had spent all that time devising fresh blasphemies to defend it.

"This is not a crusade," Alaya said, injecting confidence into her voice. "And Keter has never faced *us*."

The other woman slowly nodded.

"I suppose it hasn't," Ime murmured.

Silence filled the room, neither of them pressed to break it. Alaya leaned back into her seat, closing her eyes, and for the first time today allowed herself to feel how fucking *exhausted* she was. Like string pulled so taut it was beginning to fray. There was always so much to do and she could not afford to rest, not when Maddie had *died* so she'd get this shot fixing their mess. And she was not sure whether it made her want to sob or laugh, that she could only allow herself this speck of sincerity when shut in this room with a woman who'd betrayed her. A woman she had kept as her spymistress and closest advisor, for all that, because *who the Hells else was left?*

Alaya had not been one of the Calamities in life, and in death they'd left her behind again.

But there was work to be done, an oath to keep, so piece by piece Alaya of Satus put herself back together again. Her eyes opened and she rose to her feet, meeting Ime's gaze.

"Tonight," the Chancellor of Praes said. "Tonight you'll see why this one is different."

*You and all the Grand Alliance*, Alaya thought.

—

Though the wind whipped wildly at the walls, she did not feel so much as a breeze.

Alaya's hands gripped the arms of her throne as she sat ramrod straight, her stomach clenching as the fortress plunged through the sky. Lady Nahiza was giggling almost girlishly, sorcery swirling around her in strands so thick they were visible to the naked eye – the old woman kept guiding the construct down, through the clouds that fled under them until there was a hole in night's roof and moonlight plunged down after them. The city of Sauvion had been levelled by Keter's Due when the Hellgate was opened mere miles to the north of it, leaving behind only husks that looked like charred bones under the moon's eye.

The gate itself stood above a bed of ashes, perfect and round and sealed by the sorcery of the Gigantes. Behind some howling Hell waited to be unleashed, the runes burned onto the sides of the gate awaiting to bind the infernal host to the Hidden Horror's will. An army of tireless monsters, awaiting only the end of the 'Riddle of the Lock' to be unleashed.

The fortress shuddered as it hit the ground, force rippling out in a shockwave. Alaya, seated at the very top of the highest tower, saw every detail of it. The clouds of ash and dust that kicked up, the rolling wave of earth and stone the impact sent outwards. The flying fortress landed on the ground of the Principality of Cleves like a hammer's blow, the few undead that had been close enough to contest the arrival of Alaya's force crushed and scattered. Coming out of the Twilight Ways high in the sky had given the Original Abomination no warning, and now it was too late.

Lady Nahiza turned towards her, grey eyes wild with warlock's flee and tanned cheeks flush with pleasure. In her hand, she held a stone orb covered in runes.

"Your permission, Chancellor?" the sorcerers asked.

Alaya's eyes moved to the Hellgate, staring down the smooth surface.

"Begin," she ordered.

Sorcery flared, the orb burning bright as the sister-runes in the depths of the fortress sent the signal to the mage cabals that had been preparing the ritual for hours. Alaya had, when she felt the noose tightening around her neck, tried to bargain with a way out for the Grand Alliance: her finest diabolists had agreed that a Greater Breach could not be closed, save perhaps through the wrath of a Choir, but that it could be... added to. Seven days a year, that had been the lock Alaya proposed to add. Devils would only be able to cross during those seven days and nights, buying the Grand Alliance at least another year to deal with the Dead King.

Alaya of Satus, who had once been Malicia, watched the gate as below her sorcery bloomed. The Dead King's gate, the end of the mistake she'd made that had begun it all. That had cost her almost everyone she loved. But there was one last gesture she could make in the face of that, for while she had been seeking the words of mages Amadeus had been doing the same. Only it was Nahiza Serrif he had sought, asking her entirely different questions.

"So tonight, King of Death," Alaya said, "listen closely, for you hear our last song. My part and his – half from the grave as is ever your due."

And magic filled the night as the Riddle of the Lock died, the first step of the ritual coalescing into burning shackles around the Hellgate. Seven nights and seven days, beginning now. Alaya's refrain, fitted to the song. In the breath that followed the first devil crossed, a hulking shape covered in spikes, but the sorcery was not yet finished. The second step, brazenly mad, began with half a ton of coal was set alight. Smoke billowed out in thick trails through vents, the heat feeding into arrays whose powers mirrored that of the gate. Thousands of aurelii's worth of the most expensive magical reagents known to man were being expended every thirty breaths, cabals of mages at the beginning of constant rotations spending themselves raw.

The diabolists were stealing the leash on the devils beginning to pour out of the gate, and the sound of it was Amadeus' refrain.

It would keep going for seven night and seven days, until the gate closed for a year and Alaya sent the thousands of devils that had been stolen north with one order only: *make war on the dead*. The two of them had shaken the world once upon a time, when they'd been young and the worst of them had not yet caught up to the best.

"One last time, Maddie," Allie softly said. "You and me against the world."

Thunder rumbled, but what did she have to fear? She was the one who'd brought it.

## Chapter 49: Arrival

*"There is no more one last war than there is one last tide. Perhaps even less, for the moon will change before men do."*

– King Jehan the Wise of Callow

The last campfire before the plunge, I felt, ought to have been more momentous than this. Instead it was strikingly mundane, the

rabbits Cordelia had shot during the day's travelling ending up roasted by Masego over the open flame as I went to pick up firewood and Akua groomed the horses. I'd actually thought I'd get out of firewood duty by catching a few birds, but Zombie had gobbled the first up – purely out of spite, the damned bird didn't even need to eat – and screeched so loudly the rest had scattered, so down into the brush I went. I tied her to the tree furthest from the fire, informing she had been a Bad Girl and She Needed To Learn Her Lesson. She cawed at me rather skeptically, which I did not take to be a good sign.

I blamed the Sisters, they were a bad influence.

I got back with the last batch of dry wood in time to get my skewer fresh off the fire, Cordelia doing a decent job of hiding her horror as Masego told her why it wasn't actually a good idea to cook with hellflame even though the temperature was more stable.

"The taste of brimstone is quite overwhelming," Zeze sagely told her. "My experiments were conclusive."

"By that he means that Indrani talked him into scrapping our entire meal twice," I drily said, swallowing a groan as I lowered myself into sitting on the ground.

It was a nice little clearing that we'd chosen as our camp site for the night, surrounded by just thick enough a thicket that it gave us the illusion of privacy even as we sat in the midst of a host of fifteen thousand Firstborn. I'd set down a boundary line in Night that added some genuine privacy to the appearance of it, but getting the drow to actually keep their distance had been more difficult. Upon learning that I intended to eat fresh meat nineteen sigil-holders had volunteered their sigils to hunt game in my name, and they'd been halfway through talking themselves into duels over the privilege when I put my foot down.

Amusing as the thought of five thousand Firstborn scouring the countryside of the Ways clean of every living creature larger than a mouse was, Cordelia's rabbits would be quite enough.

"I am not sure whether that is technically blasphemy," the fair-haired princess noted, "but I cannot help but feel that it should be."

"It sometimes shows that you have never been hosted in Praes, darling," Akua told, strolling out of the woods. "Dinner canmost *definitely* be blasphemous."

Cordelia, feet not going over the side of the blanket she'd laid on the ground by so much as a hair and hands folded primly over her lap, offered the other woman a flat stare as she sat to my left.

"It sometimes worries me," she said, "that when you speak of Praes, it is hard to discern what is a jest and not."

"And if you think *that's* a joke, I've eaten what she thinks is appropriately seasoned chicken," I muttered at Cordelia under my breath. "It'd make you wish for the goddamn brimstone."

"Your national dish is stew, Catherine," Akua retorted, unimpressed.

"Stew's good," I protested. "We eat it all the time."

There was a choked noise that sounded suspiciously like suppressed laughter coming from my right. I narrowed my eye at now suspiciously expressionless princess.

"Out with it," I sighed.

"I once asked the palace's head cook to make traditional Callowan beef stew for Princess Vivienne," Cordelia admitted, "and she offered me her resignation."

An indelicate snort from my left, followed by the two of them letting out quiet peals of laughter. Typical, I grimly thought. Like the country of my birth, I was plagued by base treachery out of Praes and Procer. Fucking nobles the both of them too, I glowered. I wasn't sure how that played into it yet, but give me long enough to think and it absolutely would. A skewer was pressed into my hands and I looked up to Masego's smiling face.

"Eat your rabbit," he said. "It's getting cold."

I bit down on the juicy flesh, still glowering.

"Fine," I told him as I chewed. "But just because it's you asking, Zeze."

I polished off the rest of my rabbit skewer and was hungry enough to dip into the bag of dried berries afterwards, though it wasn't long before we moved on to the kind of dessert I actually enjoyed: a bottle of aragh, which Akua had been keeping in her pocket space for the entire trip like a complete hog. She hadn't opened it yet, though, so as I did I informed her of my forgiveness.

"How generous of you," Akua replied, impressively enough without so much as a hint of sarcasm.

"Sometimes, when she wants ours things, she says it's taxes and takes them," Masego told Cordelia.

The recently retired First Prince of Procer fixed me with a stare that could best be described as soulful disappointment.



"Eh," I shrugged. "Why even be a tyrant if you can't steal booze from your subjects?"

It was a pretty good stare, I'd give her that, but I'd had to deal with the Grey Pilgrim for years. No one did disappointment like Good's communally mandated grandfather, may the old bastard rest in peace. I poured a cup and pressed into Masego's hand as he rolled his eyes – it was somehow even more distressing a sight now that only one of them rolled all the way around the socket – and grabbed the cups for the rest.

"I always did find it unusual how few creature comforts you've claimed over the years, given your repeatedly professed desire for them," Akua languidly said.

She was sprawled over her blanket like it was a reclining couch and some oiled-up manservant was about to start fanning her. If anyone thought it was coincidence that the position ended up pressing her riding dress flatteringly around her, I had a real nice house in Keter I wanted to sell them. She lightly took up the cup when I offered it.

"I guess I ended up more the iron military rule kind of tyrant, huh," I mused.

"By far the most boring sort," Akua opined.

She was, sadly, pretty much right. Should have gotten known for a spot of decadence before I started going around in plate and a black cloak everywhere, now I was stuck with the reputation and it was too late to change it. *After the war*, I promised myself. *Pastel dresses for a year*. Still, let it not be said I'd allow myself to be cornered without a sortie.

"Besides, Your Highness," I said to Cordelia, "don't try to sell me you've never pulled at the bounds a bit – no one sits on top of a shitshow like Highest Assembly for years without allowing themselves *some* way to let out the steam."

The put-upon innocence that appeared on the princess' face was believably good, which was impressive because those pretty blue eyes could only do so much for compensate for the warrior's shoulders on her. Akua jeered at her and Masego was sipping at his drink, looking like he was gauging whether he could get away with discreetly dumping some in the fire – I glared at him to signify he would not, to his chagrin – so she gave ground.

"I did once have a banquet served for Amadis Milenan where every single of the nine services tasted of oranges," Cordelia conceded.

I cocked an eyebrow. Didn't sound like much of anything.

"He is," the blonde princess mildly explained, "deathly allergic."

Akua actually smiled.

"Ah," she said. "He could say nothing, because accusing you of trying to poison him would have been an act of treason, if then proved untrue."

"Oh yes," Cordelia said, her savagely pleasant smile never wavering. "The near mutiny from the cooks when they were asked to bake bread that would taste of oranges for the cheese platter was worth seeing him squirm in his seat through every single service of a formal state dinner."

I sipped at my drink, hiding a grin. I'd always known there was a petty streak hidden under the manners, but it was nice to have it confirmed for posterity. I let myself relax into the blanket as the cups emptied and the bottle was passed around, letting the warmth of the fire seep into my bones as Masego was drawn into a conversation about the benefits of a mage guild's existence – I knew better than to believe Cordelia had laid the breadcrumb leading to that by happenstance – and though Akua occasionally interjected I was happy to let them have at it.

The good feeling was lingering in my limbs, sweet and heavy enough it was hard to tell apart from sleepiness.

"- without standardized magical education, it is impossible for any society to have artefacts on a more than local scale," Masego said. "If there no common principles a mage cannot undertake the upkeep of the artefact another made, so the knowledge end up kept by apprenticeship lines."

"Which are vulnerable to being ended by happenstance," Cordelia acknowledged.

She had it right. Callow had suffered from the weakness over the years, and after the Conquest the Dread Empire had pretty much snuffed out organized Callowan sorcery by interrupting the master-to-apprentice passage of knowledge: only a gutted Guild of Hedges had survived, and all the talent there had been pushed into the Legions.

"Exactly," he enthused. "Learning should never be so unsafe. Every secret that dies with its holder is a loss for all of Creation."

I felt Akua's gaze move to me.

"They'll be at this for a while," she noted, faintly amused.

"I can't tell if she's humouring him or genuinely interested," I said.

Akua rolled her eyes at me.

"She seeks a closer relationship with him," she chided, as if it were obvious. "Our dear princess already has her eye on Cardinal, my heart. She foresees his presence there in the coming years, and catches a second bird with the stone by obtaining his thoughts on the matter of organized sorcery under a central authority."

Which would inevitably ensue, considering the school that would be at the heart of the city yet to be built. It would draw mages like flies to honey, and you couldn't just let loose a few hundred mages – or more – in any city without supervision. They'd have to be organized, and the ruling council of Cardinal would be the natural authority for them to be under. Cordelia had a history of endorsing that sort of thing, too, having created the first mage order since before the Liturgical Wars during her reign. The Order of the Red Lion, effectively a guild of scrying-capable mages. I grimaced.

"Thought I'd get at least a year after the war before that sort of thing started up," I admitted.

Akua flicked my shoulder, which surprised me enough I had to bite down on yelp.

"Poor Catherine," the golden-eyed sorcerers gently mocked. "She only wants to build the most important and influential city on Calernia, but somehow this has drawn attention and intrigue."

A pause.

"Who could have *possibly* foreseen this state of affairs?" Akua mourned, laying a hand over her heart.

"Ouch," I muttered. "I mean you're not wrong, but still ouch."

"You'll survive," she retorted, merciless. "Do get out of your head, dearest. It will have been a waste of my bottle otherwise."

I snorted at that. Fair enough. I dragged myself up, brushing my hand against her shoulder, and cracked my back with a little sigh.

"Fire's making me fall asleep," I told them all, having drawn the others' curious stares. "I'll go for a bit of a walk, get the blood flowing."

The ring of forest around us wasn't all that deep, but the branches and leaves were thick enough that limping to the edge got me the treat of breaking through to a starry sky. Under it

the Firstborn had made camp, the absence of fires still strange to my eyes after all these years. They were used for cooking, but no longer than that, and by now had long been snuffed out. The fifteen thousand that Sve Noc had sent south with me had still raised their tents along sigil lines, a far cry from the professional lines and avenues of a Legion camp, but the campaigns had taught the drow the virtues of order.

There was a cross of broad avenues going through the camp now that no Firstborn army would have bothered with five years ago, as well as designated latrine pits and supply tents.

"How many centuries has it been since the Empire Ever Dark fielded armies?" I asked.

I had felt its presence even through the dark and silence. Night hid little from me, these days.

"None have been sent to war since the years after the Gloom descended," Ivah of the Losara replied.

"So more than a thousand years," I murmured. "You're adapting dreadfully quick, Ivah."

It wasn't empty praise. There were modern armies that simply hadn't caught up to the methods introduced by the Legions of Terror during the Conquest, be they the combined arms or the professional ways of making war, and it wasn't because they'd lacked coin or time to. The Great War hadn't refined Procer war-making, it'd scrapped armies and beggared thousands into being disaffected mercenaries. And the Dominion was, in a lot of ways, just as tribal as the Firstborn: Ten Generals instead of the great lines of the Blood, captains and companies instead of Mighty and sigils.

The drow, though, were taking well to war on our scale. Tactics were still specialized instead of standardized – the Ysengral for fortifications, the Jindrich for heavy infantry – but I could already see the bare bones of Firstborn armies emerging and they'd make fearsome beasts to wrestle with. Heavy skirmisher contingents like no one else still fielded, startlingly quick massed spear infantry and Mighty as replacements for either cavalry or mage cabals. It was only a matter of time until sigils began to turn into professional soldiery, and when that began the Firstborn would be well on their way to having respectable standing armies.

"Of all our talents, strife has ever been our favourite," Ivah mused. "Our blessing and our curse, one might say."

The echo of my words made me turn. I found my successor as the sigil-holder of the Losara – and likely First Under the Night – leaning against a hollow tree. The shadows of the branches

reached across its painted face, the silver tree-on-purple cut through like claw marks. Ivah rarely bothered with more than the lightest of armours, my Lord of Silent Steps preferring long coats with wide sleeves paired with intricately woven scarves, and it might have been taken for simple traveller if not for the way its presence burned in the Night. In a way, after what it'd done in Serolen it deserved my title more than me: it had made the first of the new Night, when it slew Kurosiv.

It was connected to it even more deeply than I, for while it'd been my scheme Ivah had been the one to bloody its hands with a spear of yew.

"You're displeased?" I asked.

"We are what we are, Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps replied. "I fear not the seeking of Night, only that in embracing the spear we might forget how to hold all other tools."

That becoming too good at war would see the Firstborn lose interest in the less exciting labours of building a home in the Burning Lands, it meant.

"It'll be on you," I quietly said, "to teach them better."

The Sisters had chosen me for the exile, for the war, but it was coming to an end. They would not leave me afterwards, I thought, for I had spent too long as their herald to be severed from them after. But I would be a priestess among many, no longer the towering figure in the Night I now stood as. That was fine by me. I had been Sovereign of Winter and Squire once, and learned from it that one power always grew over the other. To be Warden was more than the old coat I'd once worn as a girl, but to be First Under the Night was not a small thing either.

Better to make it cleaner, so that fate's course ran without hidden eddies.

"It will be," Ivah just as quietly replied, looking up at the sky.

It was the first time it acknowledged what the both of us had known for years: that it had served as the sigil-holder of the Losara while being groomed for my role as high priestess for years, chosen by Sve Noc themselves. Each of the Sisters had their favourites among the Mighty, but neither had thought to elevate one as the greatest of the Firstborn under them.

"Afraid?" I asked.

A long silence.

"Yes," Ivah murmured.

Its jaw clenched.

"It is one thing to kill a god, another to grow a garden from its bones."

And the flowers born of blood were lovely, I had learned, but ever poisonous. I had tricked Winter into death and devoured it only for it to rot me from the inside. Yet in the end, was that too not an answer of sorts?

"How do you kill a god, Ivah?" I asked.

Silver eyes on mine.

"You make another," it replied, thoughtful.

*If you don't like the altar the Firstborn worship at, I thought, make another.* We stood there under the starlit sky of the Twilight Ways for a long moment, the two of us leaning against threes in companionable silence.

"I wish," Ivah murmured, "that you did not have to leave. That we would keep you."

My heart clenched, but I would not answer the sentiment with a lie. It offered me a wisp of a smile.

"We borrowed you for our purposes," the Lord of Silent Steps said, "and you borrowed us for yours. It was a fair bargain, the faith doled out repaid threefold."

"The Firstborn," I acknowledged, "have never failed me."

And I found that I meant every word of it. Baffled, disappointed and sometimes angered but never *failed*. From beginning to end, they had kept their oath like a knight's pride and a devil's due.

"We have long memories, Losara," Ivah said. "We will not forget Callow's Queen or the soldiers we bled in the mud with. That affection, I think, may just survive us both."

I looked down at my hands, those worn old things that'd never quite wash out the red.

"Wouldn't that be something?" I smiled, daring to hope.

It softly laughed.

"It would," Ivah murmured. "It is a long road ahead, and we could all do with a few more friends on it."

"Then do not be afraid, Ivah of the Losara," I gently said. "For we'll be walking it both, and I count you as one."

The drow stiffened at the words, like a cat afraid of scalding, but as the moments passed it unwound.

"And you," Ivah brusquely spoke into the silence, as if afraid to get the words out.

I did not smile, afraid it'd shame it, and instead let silence linger. The embarrassment only thickened, though, and I need only glance at the cast of its shoulder to know it felt like squirming. Taking pity on it, I cleared my throat.

"You sought me out for a reason?"

Ivah nodded in acknowledgement.

"Words has arrived from Creation," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "We will be the last to arrive in the hinterlands Keter. The Praesi fortresses arrived last morn."

I half-smiled.

"The last to the party, huh," I murmured. "Best make our presence count, if we've made them wait."

Ivah pushed off from the tree and offered me a bow, shallower than it had been before Serolen.

"Good night to you, Losara Queen," it said.

"Good night to you, Lord of Silent Steps," I replied.

It left the same way it had come, through the dark, and I returned to the warmth of the fire and company. There would be precious few moments like those, in the coming days, so it would not do to waste even a single one of them.

—

We crossed back into Creation a little before Noon Bell.

Riding ahead on Zombie, taking to the sky, I noticed two things in quick succession: first, once you got high enough the clouds of poison thinned enough you didn't even need to breathe through cloth. Two, even as the first sigil set foot in the dust of the Kingdom of the Dead a battle was being fought about a mile to the north of us. Much as I my instinct was to spur on Zombie and get into the thick of it, I held myself back and took in the situation from the sky. The Crown of the Dead was a dozen miles to the west, the great fortress-city jutting out of a chasm miles deep and a spire of black stone rising even higher, and around it in a loose circle I could see the encamped armies of the Grand Alliance.

Fortified camps, too. Pickler had been busy, because though the angle wasn't right for me to see everything it looked like the Grand Alliance had encircled Keter with ramparts of its own. It had then gone further and built a ring of walls behind the camps, something called contravallation. Sensible, I thought, given that the Dead King still had armies out in the field that'd be headed our way. We'd be fighting as much from the back as the front while the siege continued, we'd known that from the start, but I was still impressed Pickler had gotten so much done so quickly. *She has Legion sappers now as well*, I reminded myself.

Zombie circled slowly up in the sky, the wind batting at my face as I returned my attention to the battle up north. By the look of the banners and the massed cavalry being used, it was Rozala Malanza and the army that'd held Cleves out there in the field. On the other side I saw mostly a mass of bones, with only a few necromantic constructs – the dead had numbers, maybe twenty thousand to First Princess Rozala's ten, but it wasn't helping them much. The Proceran shield wall held, Light burning away the poison in the air and tearing through the skeletons in thick rivers to disrupt their formation. And by how quickly the constructs were going down, I'd guess there were Named on the field.

A victory in the making. At guess, Neshamah had sent out some expendables to hinder the crossing of the Firstborn and Malanza had caught it flatfooted. *Tied them down with the cavalry, did you?* I mused. She'd always had a knack for cavalry tactics, even back during the Tenth Crusade. It had been her tacit threat to send cavalry south into Callow and hit the Vales from behind that'd forced Juniper and I to give her a fight at the Battle of the Camps.

I waited until the first two sigils had crossed and a vanguard had been established for the Firstborn before going out to return the favour. Night came clean and crisp when I pulled, flowing better than it had since Hainaut – and even better than before, at least when the sun was out. I unleashed trail of black flame through the heart of the enemy formation, torching Bones by the hundreds as Procerans cheered. It had a charming element of novelty to it, the Principate's soldiers being glad of the sight of me. The battle had already been won before I arrived, and my contribution just helped turn it into a rout.

I passed twice more, dropping trails of fire, and noted approvingly that First Princess Rozala was moving to encircle the dead. It'd be a mistake against a living army, since cornered soldiers fought like devils, but undead didn't rout so there was no point in leaving them a way out. Bones just got stupid and disorganized when you killed enough of the Binds leading them, some of the bands wandering off as the cohesion of the army broke down. The forward ranks of skeletons kept breaking themselves on



the Proceran shield wall, increasingly less skilled in that assault, while fantassin companies swept the flanks and the cavalry began riding down the bands of skeletons that broke away from the host.

Already over, and it was looking like light casualties for the Procerans. Now we just needed to win the next hundred of these, all the while besieging the single most powerful fortress in all of Calernia.

I left First Princess Rozala to her moment of glory, knowing that after Cleves her soldiers could likely use a battle having gone cleanly their way, and rode Zombie back to the beachhead. Sigils had begun to spread out during the hour I'd spent north, the Firstborn assembling into a marching column headed for the camps to the west, and seeing that General Rumena had it well in hand I saw no need to stick my oar in. It'd been herding sigils around since before the city I was born in was founded, it didn't need me breathing down its neck.

Impatient at the pace of the advance even though I knew in the back of my mind that the drow were quick on the march as far as armies went, I landed long enough to have word sent to my companions that I'd be heading out to the camps in advance and took to the sky again. Zombie was in a good mood, I noted, having puffed her feathers vainly at the cheering earlier and remained convinced she'd been the star of the battle ever since. I saw no need to disabuse her.

The flight west was longer, the winds turning strange and quarrelsome the closer we got to Keter, but we made good time. I watched with thinned lips as the hulking shape of the Crown of the Dead rose ever higher, that island of stone connected to the land around it only by four great bridges. I'd tread one of these on foot, once upon a time, and before this was over I would again. A look back and a flex of Night told me that the Firstborn were mostly done crossing by the time I reached the camps, the column snaking west along with First Princess Rozala's victorious army.

It was with a sense of vindication that I led Zombie into a slow circling glide above our camps, taking in the sight of the armies that'd been gathered. There'd never been a coalition like it in the history of Calernia: Praes and Callow, Procer and Levant, the League and the Empire Ever Dark. All the greatest armies left among the living had been marched here for our great siege of Keter, and though I knew that was no guarantee of victory the sight of it was deeply satisfying. We'd done it. Through Hells and high water, we'd mustered all that was left to muster. Now we simply need-

Power bloomed, deep in the heart of Keter, and my blood ran cold. Sorcery rose from the camps, but it wasn't us the Dead King was

aiming at. As a torrent of magic shot up in the sky, past the great spire and the green clouds, Creation shivered.

Then the sky began to fall, one panel at time.

I thought it an attack at first, when shards of northing hit the ground and kicked up great clouds of dust, but the few that hit the camp broke harmlessly against the defensive wards. I had seen this before, I realized in a moment of eerie clarity. Just not from this angle. I looked back, to the drow and saw that the last few sigils had been dropped down from a height. Like the Army of Callow was, when Akua shattered the Twilight Ways under us.

"Gods," I croaked out, as destruction spread as far as my eye could see.

Miles in every direction, one break at a time, like a ripple on the surface of a pond. We'd brought the great muster of Calernia here to besiege Keter, I thought, so the Dead King had broken the Twilight Ways. How much of them I couldn't know – miles, a third, maybe even enough that the realm itself would begin break down. In the end, it didn't really matter. Neshamah had let us in and then tightened the noose: now there could be no retreat.

We would take Keter before supplies ran out, or we would all die.

## Chapter 50: Clouds

*"O Fiona, would you weep,  
of your old bargain now?  
Queen to not, a price steep  
that they now disavow*

—

*A just king was promised,  
just a king's what we got  
and our coin's still honest,  
but it heads south to rot*

—

*Deliver us, o knight of Dunloch,  
Your honour fierce and proud  
Singing of the kingdom lost*

*Whose banner is now a shroud*

—

*Faith kept is faith earned*

*But when oaths lie forgot*

*No king can call it treason*

*To speak true of our lot*

—

*So one night I may leave,*

*Abandon home and hearth,*

*choose the sword and believe*

*in getting an oath's worth*

—

*But it will not be tonight,*

*the step is cold with rime.*

*But under the dying light,*

*I'll sing it one last time —*

—

*Deliver us, o knight of Dunloch,*

*Your honour fierce and proud*

*Singing of the kingdom lost*

*Whose banner is now a shroud."*

— *"O Knight of Dunloch", Callowan rebel song from the northern baronies*

The arrival of the last army to join the siege of Keter should have been an uplifting moment, like the beginning of the end for the Crown of the Dead, but instead the coming of the Firstborn had been drowned in the shadow of Neshamah's counterblow. I landed in the Third Army's camp to cheers that rang a little hollow and didn't bother to make a spectacle out of it: posturing would not remove the sight of the sky falling from the minds of my soldiers, and it'd look all the more laughable for trying. I handed off my reins to a stout Vale boy and let myself be guided

to the command tent, informed by one of the phalanges that Juniper was already waiting for me.

More than just her, as it turned out. All four of the Army of Callow's generals were there, as well as the expected old hands – Aisha and Pickler. So was Kilian, to my surprise, but I kept the sentiment off my face. It made sense, given that these days she was the longest serving of our Senior Mages. Our surviving ones, anyway. I took Juniper's offered arm with a wan smile, clasping it in a legionary's salute before turning to the others.

General Bagram, the oldest veteran in the room, had visibly aged since I last saw him. The orc's fangs had yellowed and his eyes grown sunken, even if his back was still straight. Zola Osei looked better rested, and more confident for her solid performance during the Praesi campaign. She'd not be shy before, but not that assurance was less of a performance. Lady Abigail – of House Tanner, nowadays – still looked like she'd botched out of the tent given a halfway decent excuse, her eyes a little too wide kind of like a panicking horse, but her Third Army's reputation towered above that of all the others.

The last and freshest addition was an old man with a crooked nose and blue hair, still built like a bull for all that his hair had turned white. General Jeremiah Holt, formerly of the Thirteenth Legion and now instead of the Fifth Army. The First and Second, merged after the heavy losses at Hainaut, would remain that way for the rest of the war. It was better for Vivienne for them to start their own legacy, anyway. She'd get to grant them a cognomen herself and cement the close tie, like I had with the Third. Besides, it would have left a bad taste in the mouth to hand this strange Hune's old rank.

"Where's Princess Vivienne?" I asked after the round of greetings.

I'd forgotten how very *red* Kilian's hair was, I'd admit. It was still as striking a feature as I'd found it at seventeen, even more so now that she wore it a little longer.

"The White Knight sent for her," Juniper told me. "There's been correspondence from the Kingdom Under."

I sucked in a breath.

"Good news?" I asked.

The tall orc looked at me with irritation.

"If we already knew," Marshal Juniper growled, "she'd be here, wouldn't she?"

I grinned, which startled her and so the grin only grew. I patted her arm, to her bafflement.

"Missed you too, Hellhound," I fondly said.

She cleared her throat.

"Yes, well, we have military business," Juniper stiffly replied.

She was already getting enough amused looks at her expense that I decided to spare her further teasing. I invited everyone to sit, helping myself to the cup of water that Aisha had poured me. I noted the taste of lemon, which I'd grown to like in Praes, and shot the Taghreb beauty her an appreciative look. I got a wink back. Ah, Aisha. She was still tempting even with Juniper at the table and a fresh reminder of the dangers of sharing a bed with a subordinate squeezed in between Pickler and Zola.

"So," I said, setting down my cup with a sharp rap. "Fill me in."

Given that this was a siege, who was to report first was evident enough no order need be given.

"We'll be finished surrounding Keter by tomorrow evening," Sapper-General Pickler said. "We started by making gate-fortes in front of the bridges, but we're planning a full encirclement."

She paused.

"Both circumvallation and contravallation," Pickler specified.

I could think of a few reasons why the Grand Alliance would bother to wall up our side of the 'moat' that was a chasm miles deep, but one in particular came to mind.

"They've been shooting at us, I take it," I stated.

"Ballistae and sorcery," Juniper said. "At night especially, though they change the hour to keep us on our toes."

"And we're handling the magic?" I asked.

Juniper slid a look Kilian's way, who brushed back a strand of red hair in a way that brought a faint pang of nostalgia before she cleared her throat and spoke up.

"Our wards are sufficient to handle the swarms," Senior Mage Kilian informed me, "and ritual attacks have been going sharply in our favour, at least on the defence."

I breathed in sharply.

"The Praesi made that much of a difference?" I incredulously asked.

"We estimate we might have as many as twice the number of mages as there are within Keter now that we have both the cabals and the Magisterium," Kilian replied. "It's still hard to guarantee that we can surpass the enemy in any single place when they concentrate their forces, but alongside Lady Nahiza Seriff we've set up proactive defences to get around that."

I cocked an eyebrow at the vagueness.

"We hit their rituals with ours before they can hit our troops," Kilian summed up, tone dry.

I swallowed a smile.

"Well done," I praised, meaning it.

Wouldn't work forever, since our mages got tired while Neshamah's didn't, but while we finished our siege works it was a solid defensive measure. When we went on the offensive, however, we'd have to pull mages off the defence and then things would get nasty. *But they'll get even worse than that if we don't have cadres of diabolists waiting for the demons we're sure to get dropped on us.*

"Siege preparations?" I asked the table at large.

"Bombardment of the southern and western gates has already begun," Juniper replied, "but we're having a hard time getting through the wards in the stone. We're holding off until we have a way to crack them."

"I'll put Akua on it," I absent-mindedly said.

Masego was better at wards, which was only natural given that his father had been the undisputed master of them in this lifetime, but I'd need him for something else. I needed to know how badly the Twilight Ways had been hit. It should just be a temporary shattering in the Kingdom of the Dead, I thought, but if it wasn't... I'd planned to imprison the Dead King in the Ways, after forcing on him the poisoned Crown of Autumn. I'd even picked out his keeper, someone I could trust to keep him forever contained. I grit my teeth. The latter part of that scheme was already in doubt, but if even the premise was buried I was in the deeps.

Had he known? Was that why he'd hit the Ways like this, even though he had to know that cornering heroes was putting the wind at their back? I had yet to break the sword I had ripped out of the Intercessor to restore Below's stories, keeping that blow as a card up my sleeve, but he had to know that when I did that counterstroke would cost him. It smelled of a mistake to me, and we were too late in the game for the King of Death to be making this kind of mistake. Something was up. *What's the angle here,*

*Neshamah? What is it you're after?* I drifted back to the present, noticing that most the table was looking at me expectantly.

I'd probably been asked a question, I realized with faint embarrassment. Not acute enough for me to stop, though.

"Have there been any sorties?" I asked.

"Not since we've finished raising the gate forts," General Jeremiah replied, frowning. "Your Majesty, if you would-"

I raised my hand to silence him.

"Not *one*?" I insisted.

"No," General Bagram told me, leaning forward with clear interest. "All the fighting's been at our backs. The devils are chewing up the dead in the south, but every other skeleton's headed our way. We've been chasing off armies led by Scourges."

I drummed my fingers against the table.

"The earlier sorties," I slowly said. "Were any of them led by a Scourge?"

Blinks of surprise. Aisha was the first to answer.

"None," the Staff Tribune said. "There were other Revenants, but none of that calibre were reported."

Only Neshamah wouldn't send out all his best Revenants out in the field, he had to know he needed assets to handle the hero death squads we'd be throwing at him. *Meaning he's keeping them back on purpose*, I thought. Trying to prevent our Named from catching one of them and putting them down early? No, he wouldn't be thinking that way at this point. Trading a single Scourge for ten Named was the kind of bargain he'd take with a smile, because there would be no more Named reinforcements. Every Named he killed was one less story, one less aspect we could use against him. If anything, he should be *eager* to bleed our numbers dry.

It didn't make military sense for him to hold back the Scourges, which meant he was moving according to another set of rules. And one I knew that, his intent was not so obscure after all. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"This is," I muttered, "a goddamn mud trap."

Neshamah had no intention at all of fighting us in a desperate last battle. He was just keeping us here for the two, three months he needed for his armies to finish destroying Procer and raising it. That was the real way Calernia lost, when he devoured the Principate and fielded an amount of undead beyond our capacity to beat. He'd keep throwing expendable armies at our

back to prevent us from mounting a proper assault on Keter, but I suspected that if it came down to it he might actually cede his capital. Did he really *need* the Hellgate and the Serenity behind it, if he already had the rest of Calernia on a silver platter? They were conqueror's tools, and the conquest was already halfway done.

And beyond even that, a sudden fear assaulted me. We'd bet it all on ending the Dead King here to end his armies, but was he even here? No, I told myself, I was overcorrecting. I could still feel the thick knot of stories coming together in Keter, as if it were just out of my sight, and that couldn't be anyone else. *He wouldn't have risked it*, I decided. *Providence would have pointed us at him anyway, and there's nowhere he has better defences at than Keter.* And yet... I pushed back my chair, brusquely getting to my feet. The eyes of the highest-ranking military officers in Callow were all on me, showing varied scales of curiosity and wariness, so I kept my face calm.

I needed to talk with Hanno and soon. I had to be sure. *The heroes must have a way to check if the Hidden Horror's in the city*, I thought. Before that, though, we needed to adjust our basic strategy.

"Begin preparing for assaults as soon as tomorrow," I ordered. "Our timeline has changed."

Juniper's eyes met mine.

"Warlord?"

"The Dead King's trying to run out the hourglass on us, Juniper," I darkly said. "So let's remind him why he should know better than to take us so lightly."

—

The council Vivienne had gone to was done by the time I got there, but I got lucky. She'd stayed behind to have a drink and a talk with Hanno — Callowan diplomacy at its finest — which allowed me to catch the both of them together. The first thing I noticed when I laid eyes on them was that Vivienne was looking great. A little taller than when I'd last seen her, which smacked of Name given that it was late for her to get a growth spurt, and she'd gained some muscle too. Wearing armour and going around carrying a sword had added tone to her arms. I swept her into a hug before we even greeted each other, and if the way she tightly returned it was any indication she'd missed me too.

"Princess," I smiled, drawing back.

"Warden," she smiled back.



Only then did I turn my attention to Hanno, who'd be looking at us with tolerant amusement. He'd not changed much in the time since we'd last seen each other, at least not physically. But the power I could sense him, however tightly constrained, gave away that he'd gotten something back since our talks in Salia.

"You're Named again," I said.

"Not yet," Hanno of Arwad serenely replied, "but I believe it imminent."

"I'm happy for you," I told him, a little surprised to find I meant it.

He'd be a lot more useful to me as enforce of the Accords as a hero, of course, but it went further than that. If Hanno had gone through the doubts and all the reproaches I'd crammed down his throat when he tried to become Warden of the West, then he'd end up better off for it. He'd been struggling with hesitation and his own sense of what was just ever since the Seraphim had gone quiet, so if he'd found a measure of peace with his situation I could only be glad.

Besides, with serenity came strength and we'd need heroes of his calibre to take Keter.

Vivienne set aside the abominable brandy they'd been drinking to pour me a cup of wine, further reinforcing that she was the right choice for my successor, and I joined them at the collection of folding tables they'd been using as a single larger one. I raised an eyebrow at the high number of chairs, which Vivi caught.

"We had to give the Free Cities five seats," she explained, "since the Blood has five as well and giving less would have been an insult."

"So Procer got five as well," I said, rolling my eye. "Please tell me you didn't make a scene for us as well."

Hanno snorted.

"Two of those seats are empty in your name," he said. "One for the Warden, the other for the Queen of Callow."

I sent Vivienne an aggrieved look. She well knew my opinion on having too many people sitting in council – it was an inconvenience at best, trouble at worst. A conference was one thing, but a council needed to actually be able to hear itself talk.

"It does wonder for my leg room," the Princess told me, entirely unrepentant.

"I always knew the power would go to your head," I sighed. "I should have seen the signs, just look at the kind of people you've been rubbing elbows with."

Hanno shot me an interested look.

"She plays dice with Indrani," I told him. "No one of decent repute would ever subject themselves to that."

"Sidonia once told me she cheats most relentlessly," he noted.

"Eh," Vivienne said. "Her sleight of hand could use some work."

I smiled into my cup, drinking of the wine – some Proceran pale that'd likely get rare in the coming years, given that the undead had not been great for vineyards – and letting the warmth of it soothe my throat. I set it down with a dull thud, the sound getting their attention. They'd both known me long enough to recognize it as a signal for us turning to business.

"Got a question for you," I told Hanno. "I don't suppose there's a heroic Name trick that can be used to confirm the Dead King is in the city?"

He looked surprise, the plain but honest face slowly developing a frown.

"You're afraid he's abandoned his capital in favour of Procer," the dark-skinned hero said.

"It shouldn't be the case," I replied. "But we're not in a place where maybes are something to tolerate."

He nodded in understanding.

"There is no such trick," he said. "Providence can sometimes be bent to the purpose, but it is unfortunately unreliable when it comes to the Hidden Horror."

I grimaced. So much for that.

"However," Hanno continued, "I have reason to believe he is in Keter as of today. Antigone's opinion is that the ritual used against the Twilight Ways earlier was directed by his own hand."

Vivienne stirred.

"One of the Scourges is a mage," she pointed out.

"Not sure the Tumult could handle a ritual like this," I noted. "It's a gestalt soul, not a practitioner capable of this quality of magic."

"That is still," she said, "a maybe."

I grimaced. She wasn't wrong, I conceded as worried my lip.

"I'll see if Masego can find out," I said, reluctant as I was to heap more on his plate. "A godhead, at the very least, shouldn't be possible to hide."

Which also meant Neshamah knew we had the Crown of Autumn in our camp, but he couldn't know what we meant it *for*. With that matter as settled as it could be in the moment, I pivoted to the greater consideration.

"So," I said, "I hear we've got word from the Kingdom Under."

Both their faces were grim, a sight that had my stomach clenching.

"Two letters," Vivienne said. "A personal one from the Herald, carried by Seeker Balasi, and a formal one from the negotiator for the King Under the Mountain."

She'd phrased the letters as coming from two different people, which had a worrying implication.

"The Herald's no longer in charge of negotiations," I stated, and it was not a question.

"He has been replaced," Hanno said, "by a Lady Sybella. Who informs us that any promises he might have made were done so without the backing of the Kingdom Under."

"*Fuck*," I feelingly said.

I leaned back into the chair, closing my eye and tilting my head back. That wasn't quite the worst outcome for us, but it wasn't far either. The amount of soldiers we'd gathered for the siege of Keter was the single largest army – of the living, anyway – in the history of Calernia. Numbers were a little vague given the many moving parts and lack of records in some armies, but we should be somewhere between two hundred and two hundred fifty thousand souls in all. Cordelia had pulled off fucking miracles getting enough supplies to feed an army that size on the march from a crumbling Procer, and gone even further by getting enough to feed us for part of the siege, but it wouldn't *last*.

"How long do we have before we're out?" I asked.

"For water, two months," Vivienne said. "We've already started rationing food, and at this rate we have three to four weeks left."

"If the Dead King does not hit our supplies," Hanno reminded me.

We needed the dwarves. We had around two months before Procer was done and Calernia with it, but we wouldn't even last that long if

the Kingdom Under didn't bring us food. I breathed out, forcing calm, and opened my eye.

"All right," I said. "Hit me with it. What does Lady Sybella want?"

"The original terms the Herald proposed," Hanno said. "With the addition of the city of Keter."

I thinly smiled.

"Does she also want Laure while she's at it?" I bit out.

"The phrasing of her missive was... strong, Cat," Vivienne said. "She's not interested in negotiating terms with us. We take it or leave it."

My fingers clenched. One of these days, we'd have to get around to teach the Kingdom Under a modicum of humility. They were the great empire of Calernia, but their hegemony had always relied on keeping out of surface affairs and playing nations against each other. Now that they were putting a knife at our common throat to extort us while the Dead King tried to kill us all, they'd outed themselves for the bandits they were. If we survived this fucking war, I expected that diplomatic efforts to squeeze the dwarves out of our affairs would find fertile grounds.

But first we had to survive.

"She has to know at least half of us would rather tell the dwarves to bite it and take our chances with Keter," I finally said. "And that was before she further upped the price. She's overplaying her hand. Why?"

"The Herald's letter shed some light on the matter," Hanno said, jaw locked tight. "He tells us that the Kingdom Under has learned of the ealamal's existence."

I blinked. Yeah, hard to keep that under wraps when it was getting brought here for the siege. What would that change – no, he couldn't *possibly* mean that.

"You can't be serious," I quietly said. "They actually *want* us to use it?"

"The mathematics are simple, from where they're standing," Vivienne ruefully said. "Either we give them everything they want and they lend a hand, or we blow them off and lose to the dead without them. Then, in our despair..."

"They think we'll blow ourselves to the Hells and the Dead King with us," I completed.

"Not so much to the Hells," Hanno said, "but that is the essence of it. They expect the ealamal to empty large swaths of western Calernia, leaving the lands ripe for the taking."

Why bother negotiating with the humans, I thought, when they might do you the courtesy of emptying their own lands so you could take them? And since the ealamal was unlikely to reach as far as southern Procer, they could still take the cities they'd asked for by force with the populations intact afterwards. Gods, with the continent so ravaged some might even be grateful for the protection.

"That's one of the vilest plans I've ever heard," I said. "And I have heard vile plans, Hanno, even speaking a few myself."

"It is unconscionable," the dark-skinned man agreed. "The Herald of the Deeps agrees, hence his warning. He also reiterates his promise that he will do all he can."

I almost rolled my eye at that, refraining only for Hanno's sake. So far all the Herald had done was try to roll us when we were vulnerable and then fail to be of any use when turning his cloak. I'd spare a speck of gratitude for the warning, but wasn't putting a lot of hope in the dwarf. He'd done nothing to warrant it and much to do otherwise. The room fell silent and I began drumming my fingers against the table, lost in thought. Eventually, though, I had to speak up.

"I don't see a way out of this," I quietly admitted. "Our bet was that the Herald would come through, and it appears we've lost it."

"With the rationing we still have three weeks," Vivienne said, but we both knew otherwise.

It would hardly be a victory to take Keter within that time, because our armies would likely be fucked anyways: we couldn't forage in the Kingdom of the Dead, which mean that to eat we'd have to march *back*. To Procer or Serolen, but both were weeks away. Weeks where hundreds of thousands of soldiers would be expected to march with empty stomach. They'd die, we all knew. They'd die in droves, and darks things would be done as we grew desperate to survive. Even if we won, I realized, even if we got the Dead King, we might still lose. Not because of Gods or sorcery or a story, but because we were too far out in enemy territory without a supply line and our diplomatic efforts had failed.

"The cause is not lost," Hanno said, unruffled. "Being cornered with everything on the line lends us strength enough to overcome the impossible."

He paused, brown eyes moving to me.

"And that sword at your hip is not a sword at all, Catherine, unless I'm gravely mistaken."

People didn't actually tend to notice the sword at all unless it was pointed out to them, even Hanno, but then Hanno's name hadn't been picked out of a hat when he became the Sword of Judgement. But Vivienne, from the half-hidden startlement on her face, had not noticed it until just now. I unclasped the sheath from my belt, a beautiful wooden piece carved and painted by an artisan of the Ysengral Sigil that displayed the northern constellations on moonless night, and slid out the blade. It didn't look like much, really. Just a smooth steel arming sword that lacked a crossguard, its edge wickedly sharp to even a casual eye but otherwise unremarkable.

It was only fitting, I supposed, that Below's stories would take the form of a double-edged blade without a guard. Sometime my Gods had a halfway decent sense of humour

"No," I agreed, "it's a little more than that."

"You can free the stories at any time, then," Hanno said. "And it might not be as simple as sealing his doom in a single stroke, but..."

"It'll tip the balance," I finished.

It'd hurt him. That was the reason behind the strategy I'd begun sniffing out today, after all: Neshamah was afraid of the stories coming back. That was why the only armies fighting the Grand Alliance were coming from outside the city, why they were led by Scourges and why he was hiding behind his walls. It was even why he'd shattered the Twilight Ways only after the Firstborn had crossed: he was religiously avoiding direct confrontation. Because he knew the moment it was him against us, everything on the line, I'd break the sword and the result would not be a finger on the balance so much as a hand around his throat.

We were in deeps, I wouldn't deny that, but so was *he*. And that meant we were still in this war.

"Masego called it the Book of Some Things, the other one," Vivienne said.

"Not my choice," I defended. "He insisted that since he'd made the artefact he should get to name it."

"I thought the name rather charming, actually," Hanno smiled.

Ugh, he would. I shared a look with the other Callowan in the room.

"So what are you calling this one, then?" Vivienne asked.

I raised up the blade, noticing it did not gleam even under candlelight – as if it refused to reflect light entirely – and studied it, then smiled. It'd be a shame not to keep to the naming scheme now that Hierophant had started it, since it was too late to take back anyway.

"I'm rather partial," I replied, "to the 'Sword of the Rest'."

## Chapter 51: Arsenal

*"Thirty-three: it doesn't matter how good the sword is, if it talks put it back where you found it. Yes, even if it lets you beat your nemesis. They probably thought their talking sword was a good idea too and look where that got them."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Indrani was carving away at the table when I found her, sprawled under it.

"I may have to call the guards," I mused out loud, taking off my riding gloves, "there appears to be some kind of table goblin in my tent."

I got a scoff in answer and she popped out her head long enough to roll her eyes at me.

"Please," Archer replied. "I'm at least the height of two table goblins."

She retreated under the table, steel rasping against wood as she shaved away at a detail, and when she spoke up again I could hear the goddamn grin in her voice.

"Unlike some," she airily added.

"That's treason, it is," I gravely replied.

"This is why we call you Sanguinia behind your back, you know," Indrani informed me.

"She was a visionary ahead of her time," I defended.

Dread Empress Sanguinia II had outlawed being taller than her in the final – relatively more – despotic years of reign, which was a sensible enough decree. She'd also outlawed cats for some reason, which I honestly I could take or leave. I unclasped my sheath, set it on the table and leaned against it to dip under and at least have a look at her face. What I got instead was pulled by the collar followed by warm lips against mine, with a hungry little nip at the end that had me lingering for more. Must have stayed there a while, because I was still enjoying myself

when someone cleared their throat behind me. I dipped back out, a little out of breath, and found Vivienne eyeing me impatiently.

"Vivs," Indrani drawled, still under the table, "I know you want in on this real bad, but wait for your turn."

The Princess's blue-grey eyes considered me, then moved to Indrani's half-visible body.

"I could do better," Vivienne shrugged.

"Who's she talking about?" 'Drani asked from under the table.

"Both," she replied in my stead, not hesitating for a moment.

"Hey," I protested. "I got stabbed in Serolen and it still kind of stung less than that."

"You should probably stop making plans that have a step where you get stabbed, you know," Indrani advised me. "I'm no expert, but it does seem like a flaw in your plan-making process."

"You can't ask her that, Indrani," Vivienne chided. "You know it's what she always uses when she's missing a step. Like, don't know how to convince that princess?"

"Get stabbed," Archer chortled, the filthy traitor. "Don't know how to beat that hero?"

"Get stabbed," Vivienne completed, meeting my eye with a look of smug satisfaction.

I glared back. We both knew Indrani was going to worry that joke like a fucking bone for at least a year now, which Vivienne had inflicted on me purely as her long price for forcing her to see what she'd walked in on.

"Why did I even miss you people?" I asked.

My eye narrowed.

"And it's my goddamn tent you know," I told Vivienne. "Don't think I won't find Arthur some nice noble boy and crown his ass instead, Dartwick."

"I have no idea what you might be referring to," the Princess smilingly lied. "I only came to inform you that we've talks to wrap up with Prince Otto at Evening Bell."

I blinked in surprise.

"About..." I leadingly said.

"Yes," she confirmed.



"I didn't think you'd get it done this quickly, given the circumstances," I admitted. "Well done."

"Do not overpraise me," she demurred, lips quirking anyway. "Reitzenberg proved a remarkably straightforward man to deal with even before Prince Frederic joined his name to the venture."

The Kingfisher Prince was in as well? No, of course he was. That'd always been the most admirable thing about Frederic Goethal: he always tried to do what he thought was right, whether or not it was convenient for everyone else. I'd cursed him for that at the Arsenal, when he'd refused to give Cordelia and I our easy way out of the situation with the Red Axe, but it wouldn't do to forget that most of time it was a boon that the Prince of Brus went out of his way to be a good man.

"I'll be there," I said, then paused. "And get Pickler to come as well, would you?"

I was fixed with a steady look.

"As is she fond of telling me," Vivienne said, "she is busy enough for five of her, which sadly Masego has not yet figured out how to make because as usual sorcery is useless."

"Make her come anyway," I said, and it was not a suggestion this time.

She nodded. Good. I'd meant it, when in Serolen I'd told Cordelia I intended to repay every drop of my debt to the people that'd raised me up. And Pickler had been in that room, the first time I strayed from Black and Malicia's plan to make something of my own. The first time I committed treason to their cause for fidelity to my own. She'd argued, she'd been afraid, but in the end she had sworn.

And I had not forgotten.

"I've got correspondence that could use your attention, if you have the time," Vivienne said.

Barely two hours into camp and already I had a dozen duties pulling me in different directions. Serolen, for all the dangers there, had been strikingly less demanding in that regard. A reminder that I was not a figurehead or a symbol here, that I had made myself an integral part of the Grand Alliance and its policies.

"Can't," I replied. "Hanno suggested I have a look at something the Blessed Artificer has been cooking up."

I'd had a look at it back in Salia and been impressed by the power of what she'd created, but when the Sword of Judgment

called something 'significantly dangerous' we were dealing with another league. Adanna of Smyrna had been eager to tell me that Masego wasn't the only one who improved his craft through conflict, and though I couldn't think of an enemy she'd have fought in my absence that would kick her up a notch she *had* been in charge of guarding the Crown of Autumn.

"I'm not certain where she is," Vivienne said, heading off my question before I asked it. "I'll put the phalanges on finding out."

I nodded in thanks, rolling my shoulder.

"Might go have a talk with the Mirror Knight first, then," I said. "They can reach me there."

That had been Hanno's other suggestion, as it happened. Christophe de Pavanie had been chosen to be the Severance's bearer, and though I didn't believe for a moment that the sword we'd made out of Saint's aspect would be enough to do in the Dead King there was no denying he'd play a key role in how we'd pull down Keter's roof on his head. To have a look at him as the Warden, feel out the stories he was bound to, was only sensible.

"Won't need to," Indrani said, dragging herself out from under the table.

She set down her knife on the carved wood, but now that I had my first good look at her since returning my eye was looking beyond flesh. I went still, sharpening my focus. There'd been the faintest trace of the story before I left, but it had since set in stone. My Name pulsed in my veins as I followed the thread, trying to make out the timing but finding it too elusive to narrow down beyond 'soon'. Still, there was no denying it: she'd be getting a visit. And following that chord I could get a glimpse at the knot to come, the makings of the fight, and that gave me a look at the people who'd be fighting. Some of which I'd not been sure would be involved. *So you'll come, after all*, I thought with satisfaction.

Good. It meant I still had one card up my sleeve that not even Neshamah would see coming.

"Cat?" Indrani asked.

I shook my head.

"Looking at your Name," I told her. "Nothing to worry about."

She must already suspect, I thought, that though she was still the Archer she was now reaching for another Name entirely. Indrani shrugged.

"Sure," she dismissed. "Like I was saying, I know where the Artificer is. She's at the Bitter Blacksmith's forge, out in the Proceran camp."

"Huh," I replied. "What for?"

"Making a sword with her," Indrani said. "At least that's the word around the camps."

I'd start there, then, I mused. Definitely not because I was putting off talking with the Mirror Knight as long as I could.

"Intriguing," I mused. "I'll have a look, then."

"And don't stay to drink after your talks for too long," Archer instructed me.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"You're putting Masego to work already, so you'll be busy making it up to me," Indrani informed me.

I knew that glimmer in her eyes well, and it usually heralded a good time. I cleared my throat.

"Seems only fair," I conceded.

She leaned in to kiss me again, but I did notice that in the moment before that she shot a smug grin at Vivienne. Indrani, I could not help to notice before I got pleasantly distracted, still had a knack for coming out of a conversation the only winner and at everyone else's expense.

—

Of the two Bitter Blacksmiths, I was understandably more familiar with the villain. I did know a few things, though, from reports and the short few conversations we'd had in person. Helmgard Bauerlein, elder of the estranged siblings, was not a mage. And unlike her brother she did not work enchantments into steel, or even Light for that matter. What she had was a supernatural knack for handling exotic materials, which was why of the two she'd been the one chosen to head to the Arsenal and work on the creation of the Severance. She'd also slept with the Hunted Magician while there, which while amusing gossip didn't do much to tell me about the kind of woman she was.

Aside from one with poor taste in lovers.

Pulling at her threads as I approached her smithy, I got a much closer look at the stories that drove the heart of her. Her chords were all intertwined with her brother's, dozens of knots ahead where they'd end up killing each other but a short length away, and it all went back to a pair of moments. A teacher —

parent also, maybe, but it was hard to tell – had given them a lesson that'd marked them. Something along the lines of 'the smith makes the blade', which they had understood very differently. Something they'd done had then led to the death of their teacher, which they bitterly blame each other for.

It'd hardened their differences into philosophies I could make out pretty clearly. Helmut Bauerlein, the brother, now made 'blades only he could make'. His Name allowed him to craft superbly nuanced enchantments, sorcery-wrought steel like the Lycaonese had not seen in generations. Helmgard, instead, had learned that a smith could 'make a blade out of anything'. Her path was pure mundane skill, her Name simply allowing her to make blades out of anything in Creation.

It had me curious as to why the Bitter Blacksmith would want or need the Blessed Artificer's help in making a sword, though the first answer I got when I finally found the smithy had no relation to either woman. Outside the small stone house whose chimney was letting out column of white smoke, a young man was sitting around with all the awkward restlessness so common in those of that age. Arthur Foundling, lately the Knight Errant, was trying to look casual leaning against the wall when he very clearly felt like pacing. I hummed, limping in his direction, and looked deeper.

There was a chord here, binding him to someone inside the smithy. Or *something*, maybe. Wasn't good enough at reading the differences to tell yet.

The Knight Errant straightened up out of his slouch the moment he noticed me, blue eyes widening in surprise. He had what almost looked like a spasm when he couldn't seem to decide whether he should salute or bow, settling into a gesture that tried to be both and fell short of either.

"Arthur," I greeted him. "Or should that be Sir Arthur, these days?"

"I have not been knighted as one of the Broken Bells," the dark-haired boys seriously replied.

I almost snorted. It was true I'd never taken back my order to Brandon Talbot that nobody was to knight him, but you might say someone had gone above my head for that. Ugh, pun not intended.

"And Hanno's not a lord," I said. "Yet people went as far as calling him a prince, not so long ago."

For that matter, I seriously doubted Hanno of Arwad had actually ever been formally knighted by anyone. Well, anyone mortal anyway. I wasn't sure I wanted to recognize the Choir of Judgment's ability to make knights, which made it all the more

fortunate I had someone in my corner arguing the matter. As far as I knew, Anaxares the Diplomat was still up there making a racket. Gods bless the madman, at least as many as cursed him.

"I am not Hanno of Arwad," the Knight Errant firmly said. "And I'll not deny my Name, but neither will I claim a title I do not hold."

I found myself smiling. *What a brat*, I thought, not entirely without fondness. I'd have to see about getting him knighted properly, then: we'd look like right fools if he went around having Knight in his Name with no mundane title matching it.

"I'm sure something must be in the works," I replied, remaining vague.

I shot a glance at the closed door of the smithy, the faint sound of metal being hammered coming from the inside.

"I take it it's your sword getting forged in there?" I asked.

He looked faintly embarrassed.

"I was gifted star metal by a friend for my transition from Squire and asked the Blacksmith to make a blade of it," Arthur admitted. "It proved to be more difficult an undertaking than I'd expected."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Must be," I said, "if the Blessed Artificer was pulled in for it."

He nodded, seeming unsurprised I knew of that.

"They-"

He was interested by a shiver in the air and a flash of Light searing at the threshold under the door. Gods, I would have felt that even without my Name senses. The smoke billowing out the chimney turned even paler, as if ivory had been made into wisps and released towards the sky. And now I knew why Adanna of Smyrna was here.

"She's heating the furnace with Light," I stated.

"The Blade of Mercy volunteered for the work," Arthur said, "but the Blacksmith says the quantity must be perfectly even throughout and only the Artificer's artefacts can easily accomplish that for long enough."

I let out a low whistle.

"That's not the kind of star metal you can buy in markets," I said. "I've seen blades made of the stuff before and they don't need anywhere near that much work to be made."

They were popular with nobles for their beauty and lightness relative to average steel, but there was nothing particularly special about them otherwise – just that the ore had fallen from the sky. Some old legends insisted they were a bane to devils and demons, but then there were old legends about like a hundred different materials doing that. In my experiences with their kind, the stabbing tended to be more than important than what you stabbed them *with*.

"It isn't," the Knight Errant confessed. "The Page says it was taken from the stars that fell over Hainaut, sold to him by a fantassin that near burned his hand off taking the stone."

I went still.

"That," I slowly said, "is one Hell of a gift."

A piece of Tariq's last act, the pilgrim's star called down on the Enemy. My eye returned to the pale smoke drifting up. No wonder it had taken Light to be forged. When the Grey Pilgrim had cast it down, it had burned so bright in the sky it'd been blinding.

"It is," Arthur quietly replied. "Gaetan is... perplexing."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"He's an intolerable arse most of the time," the Knight Errant elaborated at my unspoken prompting, "but sometimes he just has these surges of gallantry. He'll take the lash for someone else or toss away riches like they're nothing. It'd hard to square together."

"The first time I met Archer, she sucker-punched me when I could barely walk and after she strutted about like she'd won a prize," I drily told him. "There's hardly anyone I trust more now, though."

"I *wish* he was more like Lady Archer," Arthur muttered, which was honestly one of the harshest things I'd heard said about someone in quite a while.

"The good doesn't wash out the bad," I told him. "No more than the bad washes out the good. It's on you to decide what part matters most."

He sighed.

"Jury's still out," the dark-haired boy decided. "But it really was a princely gift."

"No lack of princes, on this side of the Whitecaps," I easily replied.

That got a smile out of him, as digs at Procer tended to with my countrymen, but the amusement was soon gone and replaced by something more complex. Wariness, guilt? Something else, too.

"You're sitting on something," I noted.

He hesitated, though when I cocked an eyebrow he gave in.

"I thought you'd be angry," the Errant Knight said.

"About?"

He squared his shoulders, and his courage along with it.

"In the Tower, I fought against your plot," Arthur said. "The one to kill the Empress."

There was an implicit accusation I didn't even bother to deny. I had very much been after Malicia's head that day. And though she was only Alaya these days, I'd not forgotten or forgiven the Night of Knives and all that came afterwards.

One day the time my father had bought her would run out, and I would come to collect.

"You weren't brought in on the plan," I said. "You disobeyed no orders by fighting it."

"I would have anyway," the hero said, sounding more like a boy confession than a defiant champion of Above.

I studied him, leaning on my staff of yew.

"I would have anyway," Arthur repeated, "and so part of me feels like I should apologize."

I cocked my head to the side.

"Did you think on the consequences, before you acted?"

He sharply nodded.

"Do you regret the decision you made?"

"I don't," the Knight Errant replied, and this time there was an ember of defiance.

"Then don't apologize," I said. "It's a waste of words."

I could no longer hear hammering from inside, even when I pricked my ear, only the hiss of vapour. Quenching the blade, were they? Nearly done. My eye found the boy's.

"The first lesson my father ever taught me," I said, "was a question."

My fingers clenched around the haft of dead wood, thinking of the knife I still had strapped against my arm.

"Do you know," I asked, "what sets apart people who have a Role from people who don't?"

Arthur shook his head.

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

I met his eyes.

"Do you believe you've done the right thing, Arthur Foundling?"

His jaw clenched.

"Yes," the Knight Errant replied.

"Never apologize for that," I told him. "When all's said and done, it's the only thing you get to keep."

And I hardly needed to look, to see the chord binding us. Not a teacher and an apprentice, but not entirely like it either. You could learn from people without being seconded to them. I'd learned from Tariq, as both a foe and a friend. I could do worse as a role to play than the Grey Pilgrim, only with more of the grey and less of the pilgrim. The moment hung between us, fragile, and when the door to the smithy creaked open it ended. I glanced at Helmgard Bauerleins' surprised face and smiled.

"Blacksmith," I said.

"Lady Warden," she replied, her Alamans heavily accented. "This is a surprise."

She looked wary. Wondering if I'd come to paw at her work, perhaps.

"I came looking for the Blessed Artificer," I said. "Found a little more than that."

"And finding's half of your queenship, allegedly," Adanna of Smyrna cut in, peeking out the door.

The golden eyes behind those spectacles were as startling as ever, that shade so rarely seen outside the Wasteland. The two women were heavily garbed in leather, as was only sensible in a forge.



"We are done, Arthur," the Bitter Blacksmith said, addressing him directly. "Come have a look."

She paused, hesitated.

"You as well, Your Excellency, if you wish," she added.

Not exactly enthusiastic, I noted, but she was staying polite. I was curious enough to enter anyway. There was a strange scent in the air when I entered after Arthur, almost like incense, but I paid it little mind. As the three heroes crowded around the anvil where the blade had been placed I hung back, leaning against the wall, though for all my discretion I availed myself plenty of looking. It was, I'd admit, one of the most exquisite swords I had ever seen. It wasn't finished yet, neither the guard nor the pommel mounted, but the simple length was strikingly beautiful already.

I'd never seen the like of that metal before: it seemed as if it'd been made of pale smoke, the turns of it fuming down the edge. When you looked at it from the corner of your eye, it gave the illusion that the smoke was still billowing. I knew better than to touch it, cooled or not, and so stayed back as the Errant Knight ran his finger down the length.

"It's gorgeous," Arthur quietly said, sounding choked up. "Thank you."

The Bitter Blacksmith gently smiled, a strange sight on such a rough face.

"You brought me the materials," Helmgard Bauerlein said. "All I gave you is time and skill, and for a hero I'll always offer those freely."

Somehow I doubted her brother would be quite so generous with Below's champions, I silently noted. Or even that he'd sell them much of anything, when instead he could spend the rest of his life making legacy swords for wealthy nobles and charging them through the nose for it.

"It's good work," the Blesser Artificer said, almost grudging.

She paused.

"No, it's a masterwork," she continued, shaking her head. "That is no simple blade, Arthur. It will seek out deeds, and before it begins that journey it deserves a name."

The invitation was clear, but Arthur hesitated. I could understand why: it was a choice that'd likely have consequences rippling out beyond his lifetime. At the heart of that blade, of

this moment, I could feel a nascent story. Adanna had told it true: it was blade that would seek deeds.

"A sword like that," the Knight Errant said, "we call it a legacy blade, back home. The kind you pass down a family line."

The dark-haired boy smiled, more in sorrow than joy.

"Only I'm an orphan, see," Arthur Foundling told them. "Just one from a house of a thousand foundlings, all of them my brothers and sisters. And this blade is to be ours, our legacy of foundlings, then it's not mine to name."

Blue eyes turned to me.

"There's already a head to our house," the orphan quietly said.

My throat caught. The face of both heroines grew cold as they looked at me, but I didn't care for them at all. It was the other Foundling I looked at, and his gaze was unwavering. His decision had been made and he would not take it back. I pushed off the wall, Mantle of Woe whispering on the floor behind me as my staff rapped against the wood. Feeling the air thicken with Creation's attention, I leaned over the blade and dared to touch it. It was nearly burning to touch, already no friend of mine, but it awaited a name nonetheless.

I had been given the right, or perhaps the burden.

I looked at the metal like smoke and thought of that night far to the south, when an old man had given everything up as a prayer to a better tomorrow. I'd not loved Tariq Fleetfoot, but I had come to respect in him a way I respected very few people. And now this piece of the star he called down to save us all, the Pilgrim's Star he had put out of the sky, had come to be forged into a blade. There could only be, I thought, one name for this.

"Peregrine," I quietly said. "Its name is **Peregrine**."

Creation sighed, as if letting out a breath it'd held in, and all the weight that had been pressing down on us faded. I withdrew my fingers before they could be burned, somehow knowing it was about to bite. I found the faces of the three of them hard to read, but it did not matter. I was done here, and Adanna felt as much.

"You asked for me, Warden?" she said.

"Hanno tells me I should have a look at your work," I said.

She nodded, visibly pleased.

"I will show you to my workshop, then," Adanna said.

I nodded my goodbye to the Blacksmith, who returned it, and only slowed on my way out when I passed by Arthur – who was still staring at the sword, fascinated.

“Tariq Fleetfoot spent his life trying to make a better world,” I said, laying a hand on his shoulder. “If you’re going to wield a piece of his light, then do him proud.”

Withdrawing my hand, I stepped out of the warm smithy and left silence behind me.

—

The Blessed Artificer’s workshop was cramped and overfull, like she’d crammed two wagons’ worth of goods in a single stall. There were two dozen different lengths of wood I could hardly tell apart, stones ranging from pebbles to emeralds and enough tools to arm three generations of masons and carpenters. Maybe the only place in there that didn’t look like it was waiting on the excuse of a stiff wind to fall on me was the large carving table in the middle, which by the looks of the dirty plates and half-full glasses was also where Adanna ate most days.

She tried to put those away discreetly, and in an act of mercy I pretended not to notice.

What lay on that table, though, commanded my attention and refused to release it. It recognized the bare bones of the artefact, because I’d once seen in Salia: a wooden pillar half a foot wide and seven long, crisscrossed by rods of copper. The carvings on the surface had been sanded off, replaced instead by twisting sequences of glyphs that burned my eye to look at, and something... more had been added. Inside, maybe? I limped closer to the pillar, ignoring the discomfort of standing so near something that gave off Light like it was some kind of preachy handmade sun, and had a look at the bottom.

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. There was a copper sheath, but it did not cover the sight of the bottom of a stone sculpture that’d been inserted inside the pillar. She must have hollowed it out, carefully enough she didn’t touch the copper rods all the while, and even more carefully inserted the sculpture. I tried to grasp the nature of that sculpture with my Name’s senses, but immediately stepped back with a hiss of pain.

“Fucking Hells,” I quietly said.

“It has been improved, as you can see,” the Blessed Artificer smugly said.

“Improved?” I disbelievingly replied. “That thing is a...”

I grimaced.

"Well, not quite a godhead but a passing imitation at least," I said. "But no, that's not what you were actually trying to make is it?"

I paused, golden eyes familiar and yet not fixed on me.

"You made an angel," I said. "A one-heartbeat angel."

It'd last only for that heartbeat and then be spent, but that was about the strength I could feel in that thing. Ad considering it was giving me a headache to feel it out I wasn't even sure whether or I was going too low.

"Not an inapt way to put it," Adanna mused. "Though I have been calling it the Ram."

My eye narrowed.

"You want to knock down Keter's gates with it."

"That is my very intent," she smiled, baring pale teeth.

"Can you make more?"

She looked away.

"It was a moment on inspiration," the Artificer admitted. "I have not been able to enter the right mindset since."

I bit the inside of my cheek. She could call that inspiration if she wanted, but I knew better. *Above's putting a finger on the scales.* And part of me was relieved, for Gods – Above and Below – knew we could use the help, but it wasn't that simple. Looking at the Ram I was not thinking of the breach in Keter's walls it might become, but instead asking a bleaker question.

How bad was it going to get, for the Heavens to start helping before we'd even begun?

## Chapter 52: Mass

*"And so the Black Knight, having survived the battle, knelt before Dread Emperor Irritant and addressed him in despair: 'Your Dreadful Majesty, our cause is lost. What can we do in the face of such utter defeat?'. To this the Emperor answered: 'Naturally, we must make more enemies.'"*

– Extract from Volume IX of the Official Imperial Chronicles

Christophe de Pavanie was training alone.

I wasn't familiar with the particular drill, but I'd gone through enough of the same sort to recognize what it was for: I'd been a sword and board kind of girl too, back in the day. Might still be, if not for my bad leg and how it made taking on hits a real bad idea. The Mirror Knight was moving in full armour, footwork smoothly moving back and forth as he timed the thrust of the blade to go through throat-height in a fluid killing blow. Then pivots to the side, taking a phantom hit on the shield and cutting the side, only to pivot back and begin the sequence all over again.

There were tracks in the dirt, noticeable enough he must have been at this for hours.

The training grounds were empty except for him and the whole place felt like an island of calm in the sea of the Proceran camps – I could barely even hear soldiers around their cooking fires further out. Though the man's senses were sharp enough he must have heard my limping gait nearing, he did not stop in his exercises. I was in no great hurry, so instead of interrupting I hoisted myself atop the wooden fence delineating the grounds and waited him out. Another thirteen sequences and finally he stopped, sheathing his sword as he turned towards me.

"Most Named don't keep up drills," I called out, curious. "The argument's that you get more out of spars."

The Mirror Knight took off the polished silver helm, revealing sweat-soaked light brown hair and a serious face.

"Sidonia offered," Christophe de Pavanie said, "but I need the drills."

I cocked my head to the side, considering.

"Because you keep getting stronger," I guessed.

He nodded.

"If I do not regularly drill my fundamentals, I begin to make mistakes," the Mirror Knight admitted.

I hadn't actually thought of that. Supposedly the man got a little tougher and stronger every morning, but my reaction to that rumour had been more one of general disgruntlement at the unfairness of such an aspect more than the practical realities of constantly changing. No wonder he drilled regularly, if he had to adapt to a different grip every three months or so.

"Most of my swordsmanship was taught to me after I got my Name," I told him. "And my teacher taught it consequently. I notice you're not using any of the better-known Proceran styles, though."

"It was an inheritance from my teacher," the Mirror Knight said.

"One of the duellist schools?" I asked, curious.

Arlesite duellists were famous, though I'd never heard of any who used shields. The green-eyed man snorted.

"Nothing so high-brow, Warden," Christophe said. "It was my predecessor as the Mirror Knight who taught me when preparing me to take up her duties."

Huh, I thought, surprised.

"I hadn't heard of another Mirror Knight in our lifetime," I said.

"You would not have heard of me either, if not for the Tenth Crusade," he ruefully replied. "Our charge is to defend the Elfin Dames and it does not involve much travelling about. The Enemy always comes to us, not the other way around."

"That does tend to be the way," I sighed, then studied his face. "Were you close?"

His face turned thoughtful.

"I understood her," Christophe de Pavanie finally said, "perhaps better than I have ever understood anyone. That is not always a kind thing."

I nodded, understanding perhaps better than he knew. I'd also had a mentor who was a reflection of the ugly as well as the rest.

"I miss her," he said, with a sincerity that struck. "But her time was finished from the moment I was chosen to succeed her. It'd be ungrateful of me to begrudge her peace."

I hardly even needed to reach out to lay a finger on the chord, old and faded as it was. Chosen champions, each fighting an opponent and wining. Each fading away in the years that followed, until the Elfin Dames chose a successor and the mantle was passed. I wondered what it was that the lake spirits sat on that needed such protection. Some old horror, no doubt, or one of those wonders that were just as terrible.

"Do you miss it?" I idly asked.

He looked away.

"It was a simpler world," the Mirror Knight said. "Oaths, duty, an enemy. The paths were straightforward, both the good and the evil."

"Would that it were always so simple," I wanly smiled.

"The Grey Pilgrim once chided me for saying the same thing," Christophe quietly replied. "That making the world black and white was to give away half of Creation to the dark."

He paused.

"That we could do better."

"And you agree?"

He looked sad.

"I don't know," the Mirror Knight confessed. "In the end, Warden, he was such a sad man."

My breath caught.

"He was not proud of his work," Christophe de Pavanie disbelievingly said, shaking his head. "Him, the *Peregrine*! All those evils laid to rest, and still he held himself with such sorrow."

"There are costs to victory," I said, "and Tariq Fleetfoot was the great victor of his time."

"It was the look in his eyes that I have grown to fear," the Mirror Knight said. "The *tiredness*. And I am slow of thought, Warden, but on that look I have thought for long."

I balanced my leg against the wooden plank, studying him in the gloom of the spreading dusk.

"And what did you decide?"

"That I do not want to ever have that look," the man bleakly laughed. "And that mayhaps the first step down that road is to admit that I cannot go back."

He looked down at his armoured gauntlet, clenching the fingers.

"I have seen too much to be able to fit in that small, simple world again," the Mirror Knight sadly said. "Sometimes there is no going home."

"But leaving it," I replied, "is the only way you get to see beyond the horizon."

He did not disagree, pushing back a sweaty lock of hair.

"May I ask why you have come, Warden?"

"Curiosity," I said, fingers closing around my staff.

*As to why Hanno would advise me to go and see you.*

"And is it sated?" he asked.

I smiled.

"You've grown, Mirror Knight," I said.

And I understood what Hanno saw in him that made him want to trust the Severance to his hand. The man I had faced in the Arsenal had been tempered by the passage of time, by the fires he'd gone through. I could still see the flaws in him, but they no longer threatened to devour him whole.

"Is it really growth," the man tiredly said, "to simply earn fresh scars?"

"Sometimes, Christophe, I think it's the only thing there is to earn," I confessed.

He did not look relieved to hear it, but then he wasn't meant to. I slid down the fence, landing in the dust, and began to limp out of the training grounds.

"Was that truly all you wanted, Warden?" he called out.

I turned and met his gaze, then inclined my head the slightest bit.

"I look forward to working with you, Mirror Knight," I told him.

And I found, as I turned my back on him, that I might actually mean the words.

—

Prince Otto Reitzenberg was something of a rising man these days.

He'd begun the Tenth Crusade as the third in line for the Principality of Bremen but over the same bloody evening that'd seen him earn the sobriquet of 'Redcrown' he'd shot up the line of succession all the way to princeship. And now he was in line to inherit a great deal more, as Cordelia had not hidden her intention to pass him the crowns of Rhenia and Hannover when she left to settle in Cardinal. Considering Mathilda Greensteel of Neustria had left no close heirs, Otto Redcrown was most likely going to end up as prince of all Lycaonese when the war ended.

Prince of broken lands in the hands of the dead and a people made penniless refugees, but it would not stay that way forever. The northerners would return home, in time, and do so with both swords and ploughshares strapped to their backs. *And they won't spread out too much at the start, they'll clear out a few cities and territories, which is why Cordelia's scheme might just work.* After a generation or two of building and fighting together, even if the Lycaonese spread outwards would they still think of



themselves as Neustrians or Bremenites? Cordelia had bet that they wouldn't, that her people would come out of it with the boundaries between them erased.

The dour man didn't particularly look like a prince set to rule over lands that'd make up about a fifth of the territory of the Principate, though. His dark hair was cut rough and short, his clothes plain. And not the kind of plain that was a subtle boast, precisely tailored and woven: it was badly died woolen shirt he wore, a little too broad around his shoulders, and his hide trousers were worn enough that the seams going down the sides were loosening. He was not handsome, his nose large and almost hooked, but dark eyes and thick eyebrows made him look rather intense.

It was a face naturally made for brooding, I reflected, which seemed like fate as work given his known propensity for it.

Frederic Goethal could not have been more different, from the fair curls to the sunny demeanour, which made their evident closeness all the more eye-catching. The Kingfisher Prince had come decked out in enough silk to compensate for the other royal's plain clothes twice over, all in the blue and red of his house. They were pretty tight on his body, which was worth a second look I wasn't too shy about taking. After all I knew from... personal experience he didn't exactly mind. Vivienne looked like she wanted to elbow me when she noticed, but thankfully we were in front of royals so she had to hold back.

I offered her a pleasant smile that was not smug in the slightest before turning my attention back to the other two. They'd gotten here a little early so Pickler wasn't there yet – it would have been a feat worthy of a Name to drag her away from the siege preparations a breath earlier than was necessary – so we'd been making light conversation over drinks, but I couldn't help to notice something a little off about the both of them.

"If you don't mind my saying," I began, "the two of you look to be in a rather fine mood."

Better than I'd expected, given that they should both be aware of the answer we'd gotten from the Kingdom Under.

"It is the news from the north," Prince Otto said, his Chantant somehow always sounding a little curt.

He was visibly pleased, though. I cocked an eyebrow.

"News?" I asked, flicking a glance at Vivienne.

She shook her head, as much in the dark as I was.

"Before the Ways were shattered, we received word through Salia," Frederic smiled. "Rhenia yet stands."

Not the principality, obviously, since it'd pretty much collapsed the moment the undead forced the Rhenian Gates. He meant the capital city of the same name, Cordelia's seat.

"I'd heard it was under siege," I ventured.

"It's Rhenia," Otto Reitzenberg said, lips twitching. "It fears sieges like a fish fears water."

"There is fortress dug inside the mountain," Frederic explained. "The people retreated when the walls were lost."

"They lost it since," Otto informed us, "but there's tunnels that lead to the cavern-keeps."

"The cavern-keeps," Vivienne slowly repeated.

"Lost those too, so they collapsed them on top of the Enemy," Frederic cheerfully said. "Then they retreated to the Old Chasm while the undead dug up the tunnels."

"The giants used to mine there for ore," Prince Otto told us. "The stories say the Chasm used to go all the way down to lava, until some of the cliffs fell. The Rhenians burned the bridges behind them and dug in."

"And they're still holding?" I asked.

"There's a secret passage from the Old Chasm to the mountaintop," Frederic said. "They sent a messenger up there and towards Salia three months ago."

"They'll hold," Otto said, not a speck of doubt in his voice. "They're *Rhenians*. By the time the Enemy takes the Old Chasm they'll have built a fortress atop the mountain."

I'd often heard that Rhenia was the strongest fortress raised on Calernia by mortal hands, greater even than Hannoven's famous seven walls and Summerholm's brutal street-by-street slaughterhouse, but it was only now I was genuinely starting to believe it.

"A stubborn lot these Rhenians, I take it," I said, cocking an eyebrow.

Otto Redcrown, his mood still the finest I had ever seen of him, went as far as venturing a few bars from a song I did not know. The Kingfisher Prince was the one to add words to the chorus, though.

*"I broke your wall, said Old Bones,*

*So Rhenia built another,"* Frederic Goethal grinned.

The Prince of Bremen joined his voice to the rest, lips twitching.

*"I took your keep, said the Rat,*

*So Rhenia built it higher!*

*And we'll never run out of stone,*

*so you'll have to try harder!"*

I traded an amused glance with Vivienne, which did not go unnoticed. The Lycaonese looked abashed, but Frederic utterly unrepentant.

"Drinking song?" I idly asked.

"An old favourite," Prince Otto admitted. "Even outside Rhenia only *Turn the Season* is sung more often."

I was curious enough to ask about that, always in the market for a good drinking song, but that was when my legionaries announced Pickler. She was sent in without wait, the Sapper-General of Callow eyeing me with mild irritation that turned to confusion as she took in who Viv and I were entertaining. No one rose to greet her, she was by far of the lowest rank in the tent, but she got a round of greetings – she'd worked out in Twilight's Pass with the two princes for over a year and there seemed to be genuine amity there.

"Take a seat," I invited. "We were about to begin."

Pickler slowly nodded.

"The phalanges weren't clear on what this is about," she said.

"You're here to listen," I simply said.

She looked like she was swallowing a sharp retort at that, but she sat anyway. I glanced at Vivienne, who got the conversation started. As well she should, having handled most of the negotiations for this.

"I was glad to hear of your response to the amended terms," the Princess said. "I would not press you to formally sign a treaty while we are besieging the Crown of the Dead, but I believe an agreement in principle would be pleasing to all parties."

"I am ready to sign the formal treaty whenever it is presented writ to me," Prince Otto bluntly replied. "There is no difference between principle and ink."

I found myself believing him, to my surprise.

"I appreciate the intended courtesy, Princess Vivienne," Frederic replied with a smile, "but it is not bending our arm to see this inked. Our word has been given."

"Then I will see it arranged at the earliest convenience," Vivienne calmly said. "And tonight we can simply end the talks with a drink."

"The very best way," the Kingfisher Prince approved.

I snorted. So did Otto, so I winked at him. He actually looked amused.

"Congratulations are in order," I said. "Bremen are Brus will be the first crowns west of the Whitecaps to officially invite goblin tribes to settle in their territory."

At my side, Pickler went still as a stone.

"If only more would come," Prince Otto groused. "Six will hardly be enough to settle the entire Kaltwend."

"You should have offered better tax incentives," Frederic sagely said. "It is how I convinced my tribe to settle in the marshes. Gods know they'll be rooting out undead for years."

"All I can fill my treasury with is iron," Otto Redcrown sourly said.

A sentence that had no business sounding as arresting as it did, I noted. As the talk continued about where the seven tribes that had accepted the offers extended to settle in their lands through the intermediaries of the crown of Callow and the matron-attendants of the Snake Eater Tribe – our own Callowan goblins – I felt Pickler's breath slow as she listened to the words. It was a comprehensive treaty, for all that Vivienne was refraining from boasts. The goblins were formally recognized as subjects with all attendant rights, the tribes guaranteed certain territories and tax exemptions in exchange for duties agreed-upon.

Mostly taking up arms against the ratlings, mine mountains and work on the Lycaonese great fortresses. Frederic instead wanted his tribe to work on roads as well as the Bruseni mines, which was why he'd also offered generous terms to any former sappers that might want to settle in Brus. He was rather canny for a hero, one of his more attractive qualities.

The talks tonight had been a formality, an end to the negotiations where I'd be present to make it clear that I was endorsing the treaty, so they did not stretch out overlong. After a few drinks the princes took their leave and Vivienne, ever

discreet, took a single look at Pickler and I before excusing herself. It left the two of us alone in the tent, Pickler of the High Ridge Tribe's face unreadable. Those large amber eyes did not blink as she stared at me, her once-smooth skin now creased with wrinkles. Goblins, even those of Matron lines like her, aged so much quicker than humans.

"You did this," Pickler finally said.

"Vivienne handled most of it," I said.

"But it was possible," she said, "because you put your weight behind it."

I did not deny it, since it was true, but she was putting too much on my shoulders. The Lycaonese had already been interested, it'd just been a question of getting the practicalities of it done. And getting Rozala Malanza to approve, though strictly speaking her approval wasn't actually needed since princes were free to handle such a matter as they wished. It'd helped, though, and would prevent trouble from the Highest Assembly down the line. The way Vivienne told it, Rozala hadn't been eager but she'd been disinclined to fight the matter. I expected if there hadn't been clauses about no goblin munitions being made in Procer she would have been more enthusiastic, but I could only push Praes so far before Chancellor Alaya was forced to fight me.

"When Vivienne had it announced that goblins were free to settle in Callow," Pickler quietly said, "I thought that was the end of it. That it was as far as it would go."

She grimaced.

"It was already no small thing," she admitted.

But it wouldn't have been enough, we both knew. To just open the door in name and then do nothing more with it. To let it end there. To tell the goblins they could go elsewhere but then let the Matrons make sure they never saw it. So it wasn't what we'd done, because I still remembered that night in the tent the plea she'd made on her knees. *They kill us for sport*, she'd said, echoing the words of someone we both missed like a limb. *Please*, she'd asked. *If not you, then who?*

"You told me," I quietly said, "that there are fifty thousand more like him in the Eyries. Boys that never got out."

"And every day," Pickler murmured, "they die choking in the dark."

"It's a box, Pickler," I told her. "And it only works so long as the Matrons can keep it closed. But after the war, oh after the war..."

No longer. Too many tribes had taken the offer to leave, to settle abroad. It would be impossible for the Matrons to keep it quiet, and from now on every time they raised the whip it would be with the knowledge that now goblins could leave. That the choice was no longer the Matrons or the grave. And I saw that knowledge sink into Pickler, down the marrow of her bones. Saw it burn bright like a candle.

"I cannot repay you for this," she finally said. "I do not have the years. But anything-"

"You told me," I said, "that your people don't believe in debt."

She smiled, baring teeth like needles.

"For this, Catherine," Pickler replied, "I would learn."

"There's nothing to pay back," I gently said. "Even if it weren't the right thing to do, even if there was nothing to gain, I would still have done it."

I met her eyes.

"Because I do believe in debts," I said. "Because you're one of mine, Pickler, and you asked."

Goblins didn't really touch others, not unless they were either trying to kill each other or sleep with each other. But her small, spindly fingers found their way into my own and squeezed. I squeezed back. We sat there in silence for a long time, the only sound in the tent our breaths.

"Do you think," she murmured, "he would be proud?"

I swallowed, finding my throat dry.

"Yeah," I murmured back. "Yeah, I think he'd be."

And we sat a little longer still, the two of us and the ghost we hadn't named, until I had to leave.

There was still one conversation ahead of me tonight.

—

Even now that she was no longer First Prince or Princess of Salia, Cordelia's tent was heavily guarded. Fortunately my name was among those that were to be ushered in when they arrived, and I wasted no time taking advantage of that.

I was surprised when I saw the drinks on the table — mead — but less so when I recognized the other woman sitting with Cordelia. The resemblance wasn't strong, but it was there: Agnes Hasenbach shared the clear blue eyes and blond hair of her royal cousin.

The Augur always looked a little lost, I'd thought, with those big blue eyes and short bob of hair, but I knew better than to think her foolish or harmless. Oracles were always a little odd, it came with the territory. Besides, tonight she was smiling and more... present than I could ever remember seeing her before. They both rose when I entered the tent, though Agnes needed to be reminded.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I said.

"It's all right," the Augur said. "I saw you coming."

I eyed her warily.

"Prophecy?"

"The window hole," Agnes solemnly replied.

Had I just gotten had by Cordelia's unearthly waif cousin? It was, I grimly thought, certainly looking that way. And the other Hasenbach's amused quirk of the lips, which we both knew she was allowing to show *entirely on purpose*, wasn't helping things.

"Your Excellency," Cordelia greeted me. "A pleasure."

"Not an unexpected one, apparently," I drily said.

Agnes enthusiastically nodded, which honestly made it hard to stay miffed at her.

"I'll just borrow your cousin for a bit, if you don't mind," I told her.

"So long as you put her back when you're done," the Augur said.

"Agreeable terms," I replied, so we shook on it.

Cordelia's eyes were soft as she followed me to the back of the tent, behind a flap and near to what appeared to be a bathtub and some very nice sleeping robes. Silk and fur, huh. I cocked an eyebrow at her, but she strategically refused to meet my eye. Feeling rather more even than I had until then, I cleared my throat.

"She seems to be doing well," I said, jerking my head towards the flap.

"She ceased pushing herself after the march on Keter began," Cordelia said, sounding relieved. "There is no point in the exertion when the Dead King's power clouds all auguries regarding him."

Good on her, I thought. We could use the edge, in truth, but I'd heard some stories about what happened to soothsayers that looked

a little too close at the Dead King. It didn't tend to end prettily.

"Glad news," I said. "Not the only ones for House Hasenbach today, I hear."

Cordelia's backed straightened, as if reminded she was yet Prince of Rhenia.

"I expected no less of the capitals," the blue-eyed princess said. "I saw to it that enough of my subjects too refuge south that we were not gambling it all on Rhenia's walls, but I have no doubt they will hold until the end."

"No doubt," I affably agreed. "I've been told Rhenians are a stubborn lot."

Narrowed eyes.

"If we must," Cordelia Hasenbach very mildly replied.

I raised my hands in peace, which sadly did seem to entirely appease her. A bloodthirsty lot, these Lycaonese.

"And how did your talks with Prince Otto go?" she asked.

"Like you don't already know," I snorted.

"It is polite to pretend," she serenely replied.

"Treaties were signed," I said, rolling my eye. "I've already leaned on Chancellor Alaya, so it's pretty much a given that tribes will be settling up north. Who exactly will depend on recruitment after the war, but I wouldn't be surprised if you did end up nabbing some of my sappers after all."

Vivienne would be settling another three tribes in Callow after the war – Kegan had thrown a fit, I was told, but had bent to the argument that we needed sappers and couldn't exactly keep bringing them in from Praes – but across the Wasaliti was still a little too close to the Eyries for some. Those that went would do so with my blessing and a bag of coin to help them get started.

I had to spend the Sahelian treasury on *something*.

"Congratulations," Cordelia said, sounding honest. "From what I have seen of goblins, they will take well to the spring wars with the ratlings."

"It'll be like they never left home," I drily replied.

Only better, because the rats weren't anywhere as clever as rival goblin tribes. Given the sheer amount of territory Lycaonese needed to reclaim, their fortresses needing to be rebuilt and



their borders in need of skirmishers this was pretty much a match made in the Hells.

"A diplomatic success is heartening, given our other... difficulties in this area," Cordelia added.

I grimaced. So she'd been told about the dwarves.

"Wasn't sure you'd been told about that," I said. "Making sure you were was half the reason I came."

"The gesture is appreciated," she assured me, eyes calculating. "And if I were to inquire as to the other half?"

*Do you still think we can win, I did not ask, or should I be worrying about the ealamal lighting up tonight?* Only it wasn't fair to ask, or entirely true, so I didn't. Cordelia didn't look like she despairing, I thought, but she was so tightly controlled a woman I wasn't sure I would be able to tell if she were. She wouldn't pull the trigger early, though, I knew. She wasn't the impulsive sort. *Even if that's the decision she'll make, she'll let us try and fail first.*

"I'll be pushing for an attack tomorrow," I told her instead, pretending it was that. "We need to take a swing at Keter so we know the kind of opposition we'll be facing."

Her face tightened slightly. Hadn't bought that, huh?

"How bad is it, Catherine?" she quietly asked.

I began to answer, but she raised her hand.

"Not the answer you would give a general or a subordinate," the fair-haired princess said. "What you truly think."

I exhaled, passing a hand through my hair.

"We're cornered," I admitted. "On parchment we have three weeks, but in my opinion we'll know within eight days at most whether it's feasible to take the city with our forces. Past that crest, our strength will be going downhill."

"But it is not," Cordelia slowly said, "impossible?"

"No," I told her, and honestly. "It'll be damned bloody work, mark my words, but we have a few nasty surprises for him that no army's ever brought to his gates before. That, and there's still a ball I tossed up."

She stared at me flatly, which after coughing into my fist I took as an invitation to elaborate.

"It's something the Tyrant once said to Hakram," I said. "A classic heroic trick: when you're juggling stories, you make sure that when they come to a head the ball you want falling down at just the right moment is the one you threw."

At the Graveyard, the Grey Pilgrim had sent all the horse of the Grand Alliance into Arcadia under the guidance of the Rogue Sorcerer. He'd been keeping a heroic, overwhelming charge up his sleeve the entire time we'd been fighting. Sadly for him, Kairos and I had both seen it coming.

"You still have a story up in the air, then," Cordelia said, following the thread.

More than one, really, but there was no need to lay it out just yet.

"There's more than one way to skin a cat, let's leave it at that," I replied.

Blue eyes studied me.

"You are keeping your cards close to your chest," she finally said.

"That's the way this game's played," I replied.

She was not pleased, those fair eyebrows creasing, but she'd been in my boots often enough as First Prince not to argue.

"So it is," Cordelia replied, inclining her head.

I hesitated for a moment, then clapped her shoulder. She looked as surprised as I felt.

"We've still got arrows in the quiver," I said. "Spend time with your cousin while you still can, yeah? Tomorrow it starts and there will be no time for comfort." A slow, hesitant nod and I drew back. Agnes was emptying some of her cousin's mead into her own cup, trying to be discreet about it, and I offered an approving grin she guiltily returned. I left the last of the Hasenbachs to their drinks, striding out into the night, and went to a reunion of my own.

Indrani would be waiting, and I wasn't above taking the advice I'd given Cordelia.

## Chapter 53: Motion

*"Greatness is a chariot pulled by ghosts: it goes nowhere without deaths, but too many will tear it apart."*

– *Argea Theodosian, Sacker of Cities, Tyrant of Helike*

It was the bloody middle of the night, so if they didn't have a good reason for waking me we were going to have a brisk round of hangings.

"I'll eat their livers," 'Drani groaned, pulling the pillow over her head. "Won't even season it, yue bashtards."

She was usually better at waking up than me but she'd, uh, put her back into it tonight. We were still both pleasurably sore and exhausted. I blinked away the light from the candle borne by legionary behind the partition in the pavilion, sliding on a robe, and limped out without bothering to hide my irritation. The large orc on the other side coughed, visibly embarrassed and unsure where to look, which was mildly amusing considering that while I was showing skin it wasn't like I had anything an orc would care to look at. My teeth were sadly herbivorous, I'd been told, and my skin thin as paper.

"There's a situation, ma'am," the legionary got out.

"I'd guessed," I bluntly said. "What kind?"

"Urgent?" he ventured, carefully staring at the quill sharpener on my desk.

I sighed.

"What's the urgent situation *about*, sergeant?" I impatiently asked.

"There's trouble with the drow," he hastily said. "The Firstborn, I mean. And soldiers."

My eye narrowed.

"Which Firstborn?"

"The Lord of Silent Steps, ma'am," he replied. "And another two that are supposed to be scribes."

It took me a moment to shake out the rest of the sleep, but once I had it fell into place immediately. It'd finally happened, then.

"Send word I'm on my way," I told the orc.

He could not get out of the tent fast enough. Indrani was somewhat more awake when I returned, though when I told her I needed to go out she decided to gather all the covers to her like a cocoon and pout instead of helping me dress.

"Might not be too long," I told her as I pulled on my last boot.

She snorted, kissing my clothed shoulder affectionately.

"Yeah, like I'd buy that," Indrani said. "Take too long and I'm helping myself to your liquor stash, fair warning."

"Pest," I fondly replied.

I left her to it, closing the claps on the Mantle of Woe and finding my staff waiting for my hand. The night was oddly pleasant – weather around Keter was largely unchanging, knowing neither winter nor summer – and I took a deep breath as I limped out. With wards to filter the air, there was no need to worry about the poison mists in the camps. Two legionaries were waiting to escort me to the 'situation', saluting as I approached, but it was not to them my eye turned. A dark shape moved against the dark sky, lazily gliding until it took a dive towards me. Soldiers cursed and reached for their swords, but I raised a hand to stop them.

Andronike landed on my shoulder, light as a feather, and dug her talons into the cloth of the Mantle.

"Heavy-handed of you to come in person," I commented.

"The time for subtlety is passed," the crow replied.

I snorted.

"Sounds like something your sister would say," I teased. "Where is she, anyway?"

"Bringing to life your little notion," Andronike said.

Huh. Taking that long?'

"Mastery has proved laborious," the Eldest Night conceded.

"Worth the investment," I replied. "We need all the nasty surprises we can get."

"So Komena said," the crow sourly replied.

I brushed my mind against the goddess's, intrigued, and got half a thought in answer. Andronike was convinced her sister was so enthusiastic because she wanted to be able to step on people, which I honestly thought she might be right about. Not that the elder sister was in any position to throw stones.

"Like you don't also hunt rabbits for sport," I replied, rolling my eye.

The legionaries had been careful not to stare as I bickered with the massive god-crow made of malevolent shadows, but I saw in my peripheral vision that the two oldest ones – a Soninke captain

and his Callowan lieutenant – seemed genuinely indifferent. I glanced at their hips, finding goblin steel blades in the sheaths, and swallowed a smile. Old hands, these two, probably from as far back as Arcadian Campaign. They'd seen me argue with so many unspeakable eldritch abominations it didn't warrant much interest anymore. My lips twitched.

"All right," I said, rolling my shoulder and getting an offended squawk from Andronike when I didn't spare the one she was on, "let's go have a look. It's a damned ungodly hour to be at."

"Ma'am," the Soninke captain replied, saluting with an amused glint in his eye.

It wasn't a long walk, or rather it was a shorter walk than it would be in any other part of the ring of camps. Juniper had begun planning out the layout of the siege encampments for the Army of Callow before we even left for Praes, so the ease of movement was only to be expected. High Marshal Nim's sappers might have matched us if they hadn't been saddled with the Wasteland's noble armies with a coat fresh paint slapped on them, but they'd had to wrestle with that headache so we'd come out ahead. Pickler, I suspected, would have gotten quite smug about that.

She'd not taken well how our sappers had gotten regularly outdone by those of the Legions at the Battle of Kala and since grown enthusiastic about getting one over the 'cousins'.

The soldiers at the heart of the incident weren't under arrest, having done nothing wrong, but they *had* been brought to an empty drilling ground surrounded by a few lines of legionaries keeping curious eyes away. The six of them seemed less unsettled by that than the presence of the Firstborn, though. Ivah was seated cross-legged atop a training dummy, silver eyes smiling as it looked down at them, while behind it my scribes stood with watchful eyes: Trokel looked uncertain about all this, but Fania was openly fascinated.

The officer on the scene, a tall Duni captain with a long scar across the throat, was only too happy to turn over the whole mess to me. As she promptly withdrew and pulled back the lines with her, I was left with three Firstborn and six legionaries of the Army of Callow. Andronike shuffled on my shoulder proudly, like a cat dragging back a dead mouse, those fucking talons. I resisted the urge to glare at the Eldest Sister in front of everyone, but it was a narrow thing. Still, looking at my soldiers I had to say the Sisters had been pretty blunt in making their point.

Two humans, two orcs and two goblins would make up the first people outside the Firstborn who could use the Night.

"At ease," I said, having seen tension rise as the silence lingered. "None of you are up for discipline."

The highest up was a sergeant, a Callowan woman with the Summerholm look about her.

"Pleased to hear that, ma'am," she crisply said, glancing at the others. "Am I to understand that everyone here can..."

She trailed off and I cocked an eyebrow.

"Any of you have a reliable trick yet?" I curiously asked.

It was a goblin who stepped forward, hesitant. Small, even by goblin standards, and with the wrinkles that began to accrue past fifteen – nearly halfway through their lifespan, for all but those of Matron lines. He put up his hand and I felt the pull on the Night a heartbeat before a small, flickering ball of black flame erupted above his open palm.

"I was out of matches," the goblin admitted. "So I cursed and then asked for..."

He glanced at Andronike, pressing a reverent knuckle to his forehead.

"Take and rise," he fervently said. "The Crows provide."

*How many years did you gain just by becoming able to use the Night?* Not so many by a human's reckoning, I thought, but for him the difference it would make was beyond words. One of the two orcs cleared his throat, the burn marks going down the left side of his face striking even though the helm covered part of them.

"Can't show it," he said, "but I see better in the dark now, Warlord. Almost like it's day."

I reached out through the Night and found his mark, the small but steady trickle being drawn from the sea. None of the others volunteered anything. Both humans were women and orcs men orcs were half-and-half, but I could not help but notice both goblins were male. Some part of me smile coldly at that, the Beast laughing deep in my bones. Soon enough the Matrons would hear about that, and I could only look forward at how the fear would be keeping them up at night. Night wouldn't care about their little matriarchal racket. I looked at the two goblins, one aging and the other who couldn't be older than nine, and the wonder I saw in those yellow eyes felt to me like a sound.

The one a sharper's fuse made, just after you lit it.

"A good start," I approved. "You will not be able to do much, at first, but the power can be grown."

"It can?"

The other human was the one to speak, a young dark-eyed Taghreb who then blushed at having spoken out of turn. I smiled.

"That is the foundational virtue of Night," I told her. "To prove yourself worthy is to rise."

I could see the burning curiosity in them at my words – and the deep *hunger*, in the yet silent female orc and the aging goblin – but I would not hold their hands through this. That was the other side of the coin: Night demanded that you win your own victories. Tossing the first few outside the Firstborn to gain the power into the deep end was not a great notion either, admittedly, but I didn't have the time to take on pupils. Not six and even less the greater number that would follow in the coming days. Fortunately, as the aging goblin had said 'the Crows provide'. I glanced at Ivah, who leaped down from the dummy and landed in the dust without a sound.

"This," I said, "is Ivah of the Losara, the Lord of Silent Steps."

A shuffle and salutes ensued, with varying degrees of crispness.

"There is no finer Mighty among the Firstborn," I said, "or any I trust more deeply. It is the duty of the Losara Sigil to keep oaths and hold stewardship of the Night – a duty that now extends to all of you."

I met its eyes and it offered a shallow bow.

"Honour was given," Ivah said.

"It was meant," I honestly said, and the soldiers looked a little lost so I clarified. "Ivah will see to your education in the Night. Orders will be given to your superior officers so you are removed from several of your regular duties so you might take lessons instead."

A sharp sensation of approval from Andronike, and of satisfaction as well. At my words, but also at me. *It's only fair*, I thought at her. They had chosen me as First Under the Night, a stranger to the Firstborn who had changed the ways of their people. Now it was their turn: let Ivah be the stranger bringing about change, working through the first apostles of the Night among the peoples of Calernia. It wasn't just lessons I was giving Ivah with that assignment: it was getting to shape traditions in the use of Night for all these people, traditions that would echo for decades and perhaps centuries to come. It was a lot of power to give someone, but how could I not trust Ivah? *Maybe tomorrow*, the Lord of Silent Steps had said as a god was slain and another made anew.

There were some deeds that made distrust seem obscene.

All seemed pleased at the news, not that an order coming from the Queen of Callow was something that left a lot room to refuse, but a closer look told me that the sergeant who'd been the first to break the silence was hesitating. I gestured for her to speak up.

"I don't want to overstep, Your Majesty," she carefully said, "but is it really alright? The House of Light..."

"It's nothing for you to worry about," I firmly told her.

She looked skeptical, though unwilling to contradict her own queen.

"The age is coming to an end, sergeant," I told her, the crow on my shoulder spreading her wings. "There is room enough on Calernia for both Light and Night. And if there isn't..."

Andronike took flight, cawing as the soldiers flinched away.

"I'll *make* it," I said, and spoke the words with cold certainty.

None of them seemed inclined to doubt me after that. I'd meant every word, anyhow. The House Insurgent already tolerated crows being painted on the Army of Callow's banners, and they would make their peace with Night so long as it was sworn to respectable purposes. As for the priests back home, the so-called House Constant, they'd fall in line. I saw none of them here, with the world on the edge of the knife, and earned them precious little patience from me.

Or from any of the soldiers that'd be coming back home, I'd wager.

I left them in Ivah's safe hands, limping away from the grounds, and as my escort fell in behind me I considered whether or not I should wake Vivienne to tell her immediately when I was shaken out of my thoughts.

"Your Majesty, if I could have a word?"

I turned and the pin told me what the girl was at a glance, if not who: the painted skeletal hand of the adjunct secretariat. Too young to be anything more than a messenger, I thought, which her chubby cheeks and blond locks at least an inch past what regulations allowed. The secretariat wasn't part of the Army of Callow, though. Once upon a time they'd been under Hakram alone, though his departure had seen them passed off to Vivienne. She'd left Hakram's right hand man in command and intervened only to smooth differences between the phalanges and the Jacks – the spies sometimes got in each other's way – which I considered wise of her.



Much like me, the least thing she needed was more on her plate.

"Message?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Lord Hierophant asks that you attend him immediately," the girl said. "He is under the threefold wards."

I stared flatly at the messenger, who blushed under the scrutiny. It wasn't her fault, Masego had been the one to send her, but now I was morbidly curious.

"Assuming I'd been asleep at this hour like any halfway reasonable person would be," I said, "what would you have done?"

"Kicked this up to my lieutenant," the girl honestly replied.

I clapped her shoulder.

"You will go far in life," I told her just as honestly, which turned the blush incandescent.

The blond hair and faint accent painted a particular picture, thou

"Liessen?" I asked, taking back the hand.

"From Paltridge," she replied. "It's a little town near the border with Vale. But I had family in Liesse."

Her and half of Callow. It'd been the second-largest city in the kingdom and one of the wealthiest.

"Is that how you ended up with that bit of ironwork on?" I asked, glancing at the iron pin.

"I enrolled just before you led the army into the Wasteland," she proudly said, then deflated. "I, uh, didn't do well at the Laure training camp but I know Chantant and I'm good with numbers so the adjunct secretariat reached out."

She paused, a little breathless.

"I wanted to fight Praesi, not run messages," she admitted, "but it was better than going back to scribe work while the world's going to shit."

To my amusement, the blush returned with a vengeance when she realized that she'd just cursed in front of the Queen of Callow. Yeah, she was definitely new to this. Most of the phalanges that served as my guards were former legionaries, and all of them knew I could curse in twice as many languages and thrice as filthily as any of them. I cocked my head to the side, studying her.

"No regrets?"

"It hasn't been like I thought it'd be," she admitted. "We fought Praesi but not for long, and now they're on our side."

"There's been Praesi on our side from the start," I reminded her. "I first raised the Army from the Legions of Terror."

She shot me a surprised look.

"Those aren't *Praesi*," the girl told me. "They fight under the Sword and Crown. Everyone knows it's the High Lords we need to hang, Your Majesty."

*When I was your age, I thought, saying that would have gotten you called a traitor in half the kingdom's taverns. I looked at the fair-haired girl who couldn't be older than seventeen, one of the children raised in the shadow of the battles I'd fought since becoming the Squire, and saw in her a seed of what Callow would become. A seed I'd washed Calernian fields in blood to water, that my father had died to grow. I smiled. Can you hear her talk, Father? It might have been just an inch, but we moved the world. We changed the story.*

"Maybe one day," I said. "First we find out if the Confederation of Praes makes for a better neighbour than the Dread Empire did."

"I'll buy that when pigs fly," the girl muttered.

"You'd be surprised what wings can grow on," I drily replied, thinking of the first time I'd ever met Masego. "Thank you for the message..."

She straightened.

"Alice, Your Majesty," she told me.

"I might as well go see what my favourite madman wants, since I'm already up," I said. "You have a good night, Alice."

She saluted, the angle of it off by large enough a margin I pitied whoever had been her drill instructor, and I left her to her duties. The threefold wards mentioned in the message told me exactly where Zeze was at, since there was only one such set in the entire ring of camps. We'd ripped out the anchor stones from the Arsenal when we shut it down and Roland had led a team to spend almost five months repurposing them into the strongest movable defensive wards in the entire Grand Alliance. We kept all sorts of important assets in there, but the two that stood out were the Severance and the Autumn Crown.

Considering Masego had begun losing interest in the Severance not long after it was forged while Quartered Seasons had been his

baby from the start, I could give a good guess as to which the two he'd be at.

Even in the middle of the night the place was heavily guarded, mostly Lycaonese foot with goblins spotters, but I didn't have to wait long before being escorted past the first layer of wards. I was both known and expected. The Autumn Crown was held in the deepest part of the depository, past the other two layers of wards – I felt my connection to Night weaken, and if the wards were actively turned on me I suspected it might be outright silenced – but the chamber in which it was kept wasn't all that impressive to look at. From the outside, it was just a large steel cube with seven rings of painted Mavian script wrapping around it.

The door was opened for me by a grizzled old Lycaonese warrior – Neustrian, by the look of the tabard – and I stepped through a threshold, the air pushing back against my movement as if were water. I blinked away the unpleasant sensation as the door closed behind me, leaving me to look at the glowing insides of the cube. Trismegistan runes I was more familiar with burned on what seemed like every spare inch of steel, from ceiling to floor, carved cleanly so that stepping on them would change nothing. The light they let out reminded me of embers, though the colours of it was... colder. Hierophant was standing deeper in, before the Autumn Crown itself.

It was a pretty piece, as fae crowns tended to be. All copper and bronze, worked to look like a circle of roots, but those roots grew small branches and dead leaves that looked incredibly lifelike. Because they were, I realized after a moment. At some point, impossible for my eye to perceive, the metal turned to flora. We'd changed that crown, though, and it showed. Long, thin nails of iron had been hammered into it and jutted out like needles while a closer look revealed precise cuts into the roots and leaves. About a scalpel's length. A vivisector of miracles, Hierophant had called himself when he first came into his Name.

He'd lived up to the boast.

"Checking in on your work?"

Masego half-turned to look at me, as unsettling a change as the way he now wore his eye cloth: like me, covering only one eye. His own was not dead, still bright with the light of Summer's sun, but it felt as though we were mirroring each other. *If enough of us take wounds, we'll have half a dozen mirrors to go around.*

"Roland assured me it was all secured, but I wanted to see for myself," Hierophant said.

I hummed, limping closer. The sound of my staff against the steel uncomfortably like a blow.

"So is it?" I asked.

He nodded.

"It will work," Masego said. "When the Dead King is made to wear it, he will lose all power over the dead."

"Some might call that a fair trade, given what he'll get in exchange," I mused.

"He won't," Hierophant said, coldly satisfied.

For the Autumn Crown to be a gift – something that was not an attack, that could not be *refused* – it needed to be a boon. A boon with a price was allowed, but the gift still had to give Neshamah something. We didn't want to empower him, of course, but to an extent we had to so there'd been a fine line to walk. The conclusion had been that we should give him something he already held, as much as possible: immortality. The Autumn Crown, after Hierophant's cuts, now served the purpose of making whoever bore it a fixed point in Creation. He'd known how to do it because he'd spent about a year studying that very thing, back in the day.

I'd been a fixed point as Sovereign of Winter, after all, though most people had simply believed it to be regeneration. In practice, my shape had been fixed and Winter's power simply filled the mould anew whenever part was damaged.

The Dead King would gain much the same benefit, though for him the real prize would be that we were pretty sure his soul would receive much the same treatment. Should it cut or damaged or anything else at all it would form anew, whole again. Given that the Hidden Horror's great fear had always been the way he was finite, that every personal loss for him was permanent, the property would make the Autumn Crown enough of a gift that it could not simply be fought off like a curse. Even if the boon came at the price of losing all power over the dead, ending his control over all his armies.

We'd wanted to kill his magic entirely – Masego most of all, for obvious reasons – but we'd been unable to get that right in time. This would have to do. Besides, even if he still had most of his magic we could imprison him in the Twilight Ways if the right person watched over him. Unless, of course, the Ways were broken for good and all my plans were ashes. He didn't seem interested in volunteering answers and it took me a moment to get the stomach to ask, but I got it out.

"What did you find?" I asked, licking my lips.

"The Ways were destroyed over the surface broadly corresponding to the Kingdom of the Dead," he said.

"That's... good, relatively speaking," I ventured. "Is the break temporary or-"

"Permanent," Masego bluntly said. "He was... thorough."

"So the Ways will be dead over the Kingdom of the Dead," I mused. "Yeah, there's enough symmetry there I could see fate lending a hand to make it stick."

"It's not that simple, Catherine," he said. "Mortal hands created Twilight, it is imperfect in ways a realm like Arcadia is not. More than that, it is *young*."

"Fragile," I quietly said. "You meant it's fragile."

He nodded. I grit my teeth.

"How bad?"

"I cannot be sure," Hierophant, "not without further study, but I believe the destruction will ripple out. Like cracks on a sheet of ice."

"Stop dancing around it," I said. "What are we losing?"

He hesitated.

"Most of it," Masego said. "Between seven to nine tenths."

I sucked in a breath.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"Not immediately," he specified. "But over the next decade, I believe most of the Twilight Ways will collapse. Only anchored points and their surroundings will be wholly unaffected."

My eye narrowed.

"The gates," I said.

"And Liesse, which is the heart of the realm," he added. "It seems likely there will be other stable pockets I do not know of, spared collapse by happenstance or other reasons, but the only reliable travel through what will remain of Twilight will be from gate to gate."

I breathed out, feeling out his words with my Name. There was a shape there, I saw with dread. Twilight broken, like its crown, ruined shards of it intertwining with Creation wherever they fell. There would still be other paths than the gates, but few

save Named would ever find them and they would be terrifyingly dangerous to tread. For all others who would travel under the twilight sky, there would only be the roads between gates. I passed a hand through my hair, frustrated. That a fucking ritual could undo Tariq's-

"Ah," I muttered, the piece falling into place.

Masego cocked an eyebrow.

"We did this to ourselves," I sighed. "At least in part."

"It does seem likely the Dead King imitated Akua's ritual out in the Wasteland, after he knew it possible," the dark-skinned mage agreed.

"Sure," I shrugged, "but that's not the part I mean. When we first made the Twilight Ways, the Grey Pilgrim scarified himself to make them. That's a heavy weight, Zeze. It'd take more than just a ritual, however good, to undo that."

"But you resurrected him," Masego hazarded, looking genuinely interested. "Which changes the balance of the phenomenon."

"That weakened it, but it might have stuck anyway," I mused. "He *thought* he was going to die for good and that matters. He killed the Saint for it, too, and she was probably his closest friend. That's more weight. No, what actually fucked us was Hainaut."

"Where he sacrificed himself again," Masego noted.

"Fate is blind, but also fair in her own way," I told him. "She doesn't play favourites: we don't get to make Tariq's sacrifice count *twice*."

The moment he'd called down that star, the Ways had become fragile. The Dead King wasn't all powerful, of course, and it seemed like he'd had to rely on second order effects to do most of the heavy lifting when wrecking the realm. Wouldn't be perfect or instantaneous either. But it'd only become possible at all because of Hainaut and the second time the Peregrine spent his life for the greater good. I grimaced. No good deed went unpunished, huh?

"It hurts us," I admitted, "but we're not knocked out of the war. We'll start to feel the larger consequences after either we've won or we're all dead."

"It should still be possible to retreat through Arcadia after the siege is ended," Masego nodded.

*Only we can't drink the water from Arcadia the way we could Twilight's*, I thought, and lack of water would kill us even

faster than starvation. There was no need to burden him with that knowledge right now, though. It was not in his power to solve.

"I am sorry I could not offer better news," he said.

"I'd rather thank you for them not being worse," I replied, "but either way it's no fault of yours."

He studied me for a moment.

"You look tired," Zeze said. "Get some sleep."

"Back at you," I snorted.

I turned away from the crown, making for the door.

"Come on," I called out. "I bet Indrani's still up. She'll want to switch tents if you're going to bed, so you might as well pick her up on the way."

I put on a smile that was a tad forced, feeling tired in ways that had little to do with the hour. Maybe it'd all look a little less bleak with a few more hours of sleep into me, I thought, but then maybe it wouldn't.

Gods knew I wouldn't hold my breath.

## Chapter 54: Animus

*"Men should always make grand plans. What better way is there to please the Gods than to make them laugh?"*

– Louis Merovins, seventh First Prince of Procer

Ater had been deeply wounded by the siege that brought about the fall of the Tower.

Praes' capital had not been sacked – though the Clans had cheerfully helped themselves to all the riches in the camps of the High Lords outside the city – but the battle within its walls had arguably been more brutal than your average sack was. The destructive brawls between Named and harsh street-to-street fighting between Praesi defenders and my Army of Callow had been damaging enough, but then my father had unleashed the giant spiders and the High Lords had answered by emptying their arsenal of horrors to turn the tide. When I left Ater for Salia, the number floating around was about a quarter of the citizenry dead and large part of the city uninhabitable.

It wasn't a bad a butcher's bill as the Doom or the end of Thalassina, but it had still been a cruel day for innocents.

Still, like most of the many Praesi tragedies it had not come without attendant opportunities. Corpses were raised to lend a hand to the rebuilding, devils summoned to clear out the last spider nests, spellfire unleashed to clear the streets. That'd been only the small part, though, because the finest mages in the once-Empire had been tasked with raising flying fortresses for the war on Keter and given the forbidding of human sacrifice they'd gotten... inventive. With a clear path into the caverns under Ater, the Praesi had gone in and hemmed in the spiders with wards before sacrificing them by the thousands. It wasn't as good as humans would be, I was told, but quantity had a quality of its own.

The first wave of 'fortresses' had been chunks of Ater ripped from the ground, mostly towers and gatehouses. After that it'd gotten trickier, the mages having to gather the sacrificial power before moving it out of the city for a second ritual. There were, to my absolute lack of surprise, a bunch of mostly empty fortresses around Ater whose purpose was largely to wait around until someone would set them aflight. The War College had used them for war games occasionally, though most of the time they'd simply been used as fortified storehouses for whatever Dread Emperors had wanted to keep outside the city.

All in all, there were thirteen flying fortresses that the newly minted Confederation of Praes had brought to the siege. The three largest, the 'Old Mothers', were essentially massive flying castles with full garrisons and mage contingents. After that we got the three the rank-and-file had called the 'Sisters', smaller castles with strong curtain walls that'd been built explicitly to be raised as flying fortresses. The last seven were nameless, cobbled together from the ruins of Ater. I'd used one in Salia when having my... polite disagreement with Cordelia and the heroes, and two more had been along, but the last four had been slower to follow.

That was because High Marshal Nim and the now-reinstated General Sacker had gotten together to think about the siege of Keter before beginning their march, and they'd come to a realization: about nine tenths of the traditional Legion arsenal was going to be useless when attacking the city.

The Crown of the Dead had a moat in the form of the gaping chasm, but that bloody thing was miles deep at least. Unlike a river moat or a pit a few feet deep, there was no way we could fill it. We weren't going to be starving out *undead*, either, which left siege weaponry as the way forward. Only those walls were thicker than any other city's on Calernia, because the Dead King had nothing but hands and time and enemies to prepare against, so while chipping away at them with catapults and trebuchets was technically possible it would be... difficult.



We had the range, it was true, but even *regular* city walls took long to crack even under concentrated fire. It would take months of bombardment, if it worked at all, and we didn't have months to spare. That was without bringing sorcery into the mix, since those walls were all warded to the Hells and they'd be defended by dead mages. No, if we wanted to take the Crown of the Dead before doom came calling then we'd need to storm the walls. More precisely, the gates: the four stone bridges across the chasm were the only ways in and out of Keter.

They were also, naturally, the most heavily defended parts of the ramparts.

Nim and Sacker had considered what an attack on those gates through four funnels with overlapping siege weaponry positions and waiting mage nests would be like and I'd felt their wince all the way from Salia. It'd be a fucking slaughter, exactly the kind of killing floor that Neshamah could use to erode our army into nothing. Their solution to that, instead of finding a way to force the gates quickly, had been to broaden the assault. Which was how I'd come to stand looking at the four constructs the Jacks told me legionaries had taken to calling the 'Ugly Cousins'.

When not in flight the things looked like some sort of botched stone corridor, but when they began to rise their purpose was suddenly clear: they were siege towers, the kind only Praesi could make. Only since the moat was so wide and deep, they'd ended up looking like some sort of oblique, upwards-sloping hallway. I laid my palm against the stone of the one I stood close to, feeling the sorcery pulsing within even when it was grounded.

"I am told they take almost an hour to get up in the sky."

I'd heard Chancellor Alaya coming. I'd even heard her dismiss her guards when she got close, though it was only now that she'd addressed me directly I was bothering to turn and face her. She'd gotten older, that was the first thing I noticed. Her once perfect skin had gained some crow's feet, but it was more than that. Malicia had always been immaculate, perfectly put together even when it was absurd she should be, but that'd been the Name. Alaya of Satus, who was Chancellor of Praes but not Named, was just as mortal as the rest of us.

That meant dust stuck to her clothes now, that light didn't always offer her the most flattering of angles and the tailored green dress she wore was just that. Tailored. Not cut for her by the very hand of fate. She was still one of the most strikingly beautiful women I had ever met – more beautiful than Akua, even, honestly compelled me to admit – but it was no longer supernatural. She was beauty, now, not *the* beauty.

"We still have to keep them grounded until the assault," I replied. "We've got the power to spare to keep them in the sky, sure, but up there they wouldn't be under the protection of our wards."

And I had no doubt whatsoever that the Dead King would begin taking shots at them the moment he could.

"So they remain asleep until tomorrow," Chancellor Alaya said.

I grunted, agreeing but displeased about it. I'd told ordered Juniper yesterday to prepare for an assault today, and she had, but that was the Army of Callow. The Legions were able to prepare quickly enough to follow suit, but most other armies were not. For once it wasn't even Procer that was the worst foot dragger, since the despite Empress Basilia's best efforts the League armies were still a fucking mess. Their command structure was unified in name only, and apparently Bellerophon's generals took to instructions like cats to water. Tomorrow morning that was what I'd gotten back.

Frustrating, but going in half-cocked against Neshamah would cost us more than just time.

"So they will," I said. "I hear the Confederation will be taking the lead on the storming of the walls."

"We have the assets to make the attempt and High Marshal Nim believes it is sound tactics," she replied. "Besides, to be the first to bleed will wipe away some of the blemishes on our reputation."

*Blemishes you put*, I almost said, but bit my tongue. It was true, but what point was there in saying it?

"You don't think the assault will succeed," I noted.

An eyebrow was cocked at me.

"Do you?" she challenged.

"No," I admitted. "And it'll be a costly butcher's bill for the first to poke their head in."

"So my generals agreed," the chancellor said. "But someone must take that first step regardless."

I considered her from the corner of my eye.

"And I'm sure that it'll be just a coincidence that your auxiliaries take the front," I said.

The former private armies of the High Lords still had very dubious loyalty to the new regime, for all that their owners had

agreed to the dissolution of the Dread Empire and the birth of the Confederation. Even if they were brought into the fold of the Legions of Terror, their loyalties would never be certain enough for the chancellor's tastes. Bloodying them by making them the first to try Keter's defences would thin their numbers to something easier for Alaya of Satus to handle.

"Unexpected talk, coming from the woman who brought back forlorn hopes to Callow," the dark-eyed woman mildly replied.

My jaw clenched.

"You wanted to talk," I said. "Not show me the fortresses, however impressive. So talk."

I was pretty sure I knew what this was about, but I saw no need to make it easy on her. The chancellor sighed.

"Your talks with the Procerans have the Council of Matrons up in arms," she said. "And they are not yet aware that treaties were signed: the talks alone were enough for them to threaten civil war."

Good on the Jacks for catching that, I thought approvingly. In the report I read while eating breakfast there'd been a note that observers from the Matrons had been hounding the chancellor for meetings over the last week.

"Tragic," I replied, entirely unsympathetic.

Her face tightened and I got a sliver of satisfaction from having gotten under her skin.

"It is not an empty threat, Your Excellency," Alaya said. "When tribes begin to migrate, they *will* fight to preserve their power."

"And they'll lose," I bluntly replied. "Which will only accelerate their decline. The smart ones will realize that and stay out of it, find other ways to keep their tribes under their thumb."

My bet was isolation. The tribes that lived in the Grey Eyries would close their borders and clamp down on internal trade to prevent word from spreading. It would only work in the short term, though. Sooner or later the seal would break, and then the Matrons would be facing the same dilemma: be less fucking awful or have the people they're awful to run out on them. Truly the thorniest moral conundrum of our age, with no obvious and easy solution.

"They will not begin with civil war," the chancellor warned. "First they will send out the Preservers."

"Right, their little killing squads," I snorted. "Good luck with that."

"They will begin by stirring incidents between the settled tribes and the locals, Your Excellency," Alaya said, "not attempting wholesale slaughter."

"And when we catch the first lot, Vivienne will have them drawn and quartered in a Laure public square before sending word of it to every ruler on Calernia," I patiently replied. "What you don't seem to understand, Chancellor, is that I'm not fucking afraid of the Matrons. Neither are Vivienne and a hardened soldier princes who live on the other side of the continent from the Eyries."

My gaze hardened as I met hers.

"If they step out of line," I coldly said, "they will be *stepped on*."

If the Council of Matrons needed me to bring down a mountain or two on the heads before the lesson sunk in that they did not own their entire race, then I'd bring down a three just to be sure the message was crystal clear.

"How lightly you think of civil war, when it will not be yours to settle," Alaya bitterly replied.

"Coming from *you*," I pleasantly replied, "that's a little rich."

And then I scoffed, because now she'd gotten me good and angry and for all her flaws the Chancellor of Praes was not a stupid woman. She wouldn't do it by accident.

"Now tell me what it is you actually want," I continued, "and figured that riling me up first would help you get."

Her face went blank, like a mask of clay, and I almost laughed. I wasn't seventeen anymore and she wasn't the only schemer I'd ever had to deal with. Cordelia had also made it a point of angering me when we first started talking, since it made me more impulsive. Akua had been the one to pick up on it first, but I'd not forgotten.

"A concession," Chancellor Alaya said. "So that I might split them in half before conflict erupts."

"I already threw you a bone," I replied. "No munitions to be made in Procer, it's in the treaties."

"Which as, Princess Vivienne pointed out, will allow Praes and the Tribes to keep control of these goods," the dark-eyed woman said, then paused. "Or it would, if a workshop was not being built where Liesse once stood whose purpose is to make goblin munitions."

I kept the grimace off my face. Even after the purges they'd suffered in Callow, the Eyes remained uncomfortably good at their jobs. While the knowledge of how to make munitions was strictly kept within the Grey Eyries and we hadn't gotten our hands on it, we had sappers that believed they were on the track of how to make them. They wouldn't be the first, since Akua had once told me the Sahelians were pretty sure devils were one of the ingredients, and Vivienne had agreed that this was very much worth funding. The Army of Callow would lose bite without the munitions and it was a bad position to be dependent on Praes for the providing of them.

Besides, if we did crack the recipe we would crack a monopoly along with it. Callow could make pretty coin, selling the stuff to Procer for use against the ratlings and the dead.

"That would break no treaty," I said.

"It corners the Matrons enough that they will likely attempt secession again," Chancellor Alaya said. "And though you have no sympathy for me, Your Excellency, it is not only my legacy that such a thing would threaten."

My fingers clenched.

"I'm getting tired of repeating myself," I bit out. "What do you want?"

"Are you familiar," she said, "with the term 'cartel'?"

I frowned.

"It's what you call it when merchants band together to fix the price for something," I said. "A consortium, only with full control on the goods they're selling."

"I would ask that all sales of goblin munitions beyond the Legions of Terror and the Army of Callow be handled entirely by a common trade company," Chancellor Alaya said, "whose profits would be shared among the owners."

So that was her angle, I thought. She'd throw parts of the ownerships at a few of the strongest Matrons so they'd get rich and continue backing her against other tribes, turning the goblins against each other instead of all the Tribes against her. A classic Malicia play, especially the part where her office would be one of the owners and would rake in gold as well with very little effort needed to be put in. And the worst part was, it was a good deal for Callow as well. Not only did it help stabilize Praes while it was trying to reform, if the only two existing sources of munitions agreed on a price when selling outside then we couldn't be played against one another. *And with both the chancellorship of Praes and the crown of Callow having a*

*direct stake in the company, even other nations would be wary of trying to strong-arm the company.*

It'd make the trade even more profitable than we'd anticipated.

"I'll consider it," I said. "Vivienne will be handling that long after I abdicate, so she would need to agree as well."

But she would, I thought, and from the glint of triumph in Malicia's eyes – Alaya, I reminded myself, Alaya – she knew it as well. I was only refraining from telling her as much because I still hated her to the bone.

"You know," I said, "I'd wondered if anything would change when I saw you in person again."

*If I'd hate you less or more, I meant. If I could still look at you and see anything but the reason he got himself killed.*

"Did it?" Alaya asked, her indifference too airy to be true.

"No," I admitted with a soft laugh. "Not a goddamn thing. It's like we're still standing on those fucking steps with the Tower burning behind us."

I clenched my fingers around my staff until the knuckles turned white.

"It'll always be like that, I think," I said. "Some hatreds don't burn out."

The dark-skinned woman met my eye unflinchingly.

"Oh," she softly said, "but I understand exactly what you mean. It took two of us to kill him, after all."

And I wanted to break these perfect white teeth, so rip out her heart and let it fry under the sun, but I still remembered what it had felt like when the knife sunk into him. It was her that'd paved the road to that moment, I would believe that until the day I died, but I wouldn't deny that in the end it was my hand that'd held the blade. Even if she owned every step that had led us to that murder, it was my hand stained in red.

We were done here, I decided.

"I'll see you around, Alaya," I said, eye cold. "Don't die before I come to collect."

—

I'd voiced my opinion on war councils that got too large more than once and it seemed that others shared it, since there were relatively few of us around the table. Two for each power, more

or less. Lord Yannu and Aquiline Osen for the Dominion, Rozala Malanza and Prince Otto for Procer, Empress Basilia and Nestor Ikaroi for the League, Chancellor Alaya and Hakram for Praes, General Rumena and Ivah for the Empire Ever Dark, myself and the Hellhound for Callow. Twelve people were a lot when you were trying to fit a group to a table in a tavern, but it was positively austere for the war council of a continental alliance. Once upon a time Hanno and Ishaq would have gotten seats as well, but that era was over. I was the Warden, now. There was no need of another voice to speak for Named.

It was a colourful assembly, fit for the stories that would one day be told of this siege. Almost like a painting, I thought.

Careful Yannu Marave looming tall and broad over slender, deadly Aquiline as dour-faced Otto sat excruciatingly careful not to even brush against First Princess Rozala's swelling pregnant belly regardless of the steel breastplate fitted to it. Empress Basilia and Secretary Nestor leaning close as if scheming, a plain-faced woman of warrior's build that had carved out an empire and the old, tattooed scholar trying to trap her inside it. Ever-beautiful Alaya of Satus, soberly dressed in green, and the Warlord at her side: a hand of steel and a hand of bone, neither half as dangerous as the mind behind Hakram Deadhand's calm eyes.

Ivah, a cold flame in the Night whose face was silver on purple, and stooped old Rumena in his obsidian ringmail who'd be able to kill most people in this room without even using a Secret. And to finish it all Juniper and I, the tall marshal in her Army's plain armour while I kept the Mantle of Woe pulled tight around me.

It was as worthy a company as any, I thought, to chart the course that would either save or bury Calernia. I was not the only one to feel the weight of that on our shoulders, and so there was none of the politicking and pleasantries that would usually accompany the presence of so many influential people in a room. Instead we sat in sparse silence, drinks of cool water being passed, and once everyone was ready the talks began. Rozala spoke up first.

"Reports from our outriders paint what we believe to be a picture of the Dead King's plans for this campaign," the First Princess of Procer said. "In every direction undead are gathering streams from the outskirts of the Kingdom of the Dead, forming into massed armies."

She paused.

"At the moment we have counted four such armies in the process of assembly," First Princess Rozala said. "One, to our northwest, is a mere forty miles away."

"Numbers?" I asked.

"Somewhere between thirty and fifty thousand," Prince Otto briskly replied. "A true army, not the rabble that was routed yesterday."

"They are gathering around a Crab," Rozala added. "Perhaps the only one left in the entire Kingdom of the Dead."

An uplifting thing to hear, until one realized that just meant all the rest were with the armies ravaging Procer. The massive fortress-constructs were rare and we'd thinned out the numbers over the course of the war, but not anywhere near a wipeout.

"I have something in mind to handle the Crab," I said, earning raised eyebrows. "Our trouble is that those armies need to be pinned down while we take a swing at Keter."

The Dead King's plan, as the First Princess had said, was hardly impossible to figure out. Neshamah was going to keep tossing those armies at our camp whenever we tried an assault on Keter and otherwise stay back. Why should he even try to kill us when he could wait us out instead? Every passing day got him closer to victory, as another mile of Procer was devoured and our army's strength waned from tiredness and growing hunger.

"The other three armies," Empress Basilia said, "are they fighting fit?"

"Not for days yet, perhaps as much as ten for the largest force," Rozala replied. "More importantly, all of them are at least two days of march away."

Considering undead did not need to rest and could walk through the night, closer to one in practice. It was still a significant distance in the sense that none of them could realistically arrive in time to reinforce another if it gave battle near our camp. As a general some part of me was hungry at the potential defeat in detail that the position represented, but that was thinking about this wrong. Sure we might clear them out through a series of pitched battles, but to accomplish that we'd have to abandon the protection of our camp for several days and weaken our forces for only a minor gain.

Beating those armies meant nothing, after all. The only thing that mattered was taking Keter itself and those undead hosts were just expendable distractions.

"So part of our force gives battle," Basilia said, "while the rest storms the walls."

Like most Helikean commanders, the empress had an aggressive bent to her tactics. It came from Helike usually being assured of



having the better army when fighting with the League or Procer, which made it tempting for its generals to seek decisive battles so the war might be won hard and fast. It was the way she'd waged war to cow her enemies in the south and it'd worked out well for her, though if she tried the same tactics against professional soldiers like the Army or the Legions she was likely to get her teeth kicked in instead. It was not a coincidence that she'd preferred to make a deal with Stygia than try to beat the Spears on the field.

In this case, though, her instincts were spot on.

"Agreed," I said. "We should take the initiative to catch them in the field instead of letting them come to the camp."

"The camps are fortified," Prince Otto pointed out. "With walls and siege artillery positions."

"We can't afford to let the Crab get too close," Lord Yannu replied, shaking his head. "Its presence has the reek of a trap."

I grunted in approval, receiving a nod of appreciation from the Lord of Alava and returning it. Lord Yannu was a cold customer, but he probably the finest general in the Dominion. Juniper had considered him as much of a headache as Rozala Malanza, when the two of them had been pursuing her in Iserre.

"There's a reason the Dead King left that particular Crab behind," I added. "It can't be needed for army upkeep, not with Keter and its forges so close."

"It'll be meant for war," Hakram agreed, bone fingers clenching. "Best to break it before it gets anywhere near our wards. You have that in hand, then?"

I nodded.

"I've been keeping some surprises up my sleeves," I idly said.

I was a little flattered by the number of wary looks that got me.

"Then we must only choose the forces to send out into the field," Lady Aquiline said. "I would claim that honour for Levant."

The other Blood flicked a glance at her, then nodded.

"Our skirmishers will be of no use forcing a wall," Careful Yannu said. "The Dominion would best serve in battle."

"Levant's captains alone will not be enough to face fifty thousand," Prince Otto said.

Which was the upper bound of what our scouts believed to be gathering to the northwest, but it was not senseless to plan for

the worst case. Lycaonese had been taught the hard way to never count on luck tangling with the Hidden Horror.

"Then the Clans will march with them," Hakram gravelled. "The Confederation's forces will be key to the assault, but my warriors will be of no use until the city's cracked open. I would take a third of number lead them out with the Dominion."

The Clans had sent a little over seventy thousand warriors, all of them fine if somewhat undisciplined foot, so he was proposing to add twenty-three thousand or some to the Dominion's remaining twenty-seven. About a match in numbers, I noted, though too light on cavalry for my tastes. Basilia seemed to agree.

"I would offer the kataphraktoi to round out the force," the Empress of Aenia said. "General Pallas has experience working with most of you, she can have the command."

And she'd officially returned to the fold of Helike, now that Basilia had caught up to her. There was a round of agreement around the table, from Rozala most of all. Between serving as outriders and yesterday's battle, her own horse was being run ragged. General Rumena caught my eye, but I shook my head.

"We want to keep the surprises up our sleeves as long as possible," I told it in Crepuscular.

Besides, if the assault went south we were likely to be hit hard in retaliation during the night. If that came to pass we would need the Firstborn at full strength to defend the camps. I received a nod and that was the end of that. The talks continued for another hour, details and plans being laid out, but the bare bones were there.

Tomorrow, the steel came out.

—

Happenstance had offered me one more night than I'd planned for, one last evening before I plunged into war, and I would not waste it. I had given my word and meant to keep it. There was never time, so it would have to be made. I got my hand on a couple of rabbits and put them to roast, sent one of the phalanges to get their hands on few bottles of aragh – not the good stuff but the rough, throat-burning fare that the rank and file drank. Then I sat in the dark and waited, until I heard a gait almost as odd as my own coming close. Hakram came out of the gloom and into the fire's light, slowly coming to sit by my side. I took out a spit, the rabbit still half raw and entirely without spices, and offered it up. He took it.

Silence hung in the air, thick enough to choke.

"So I hear you've fought another god in Serolen," Hakram suddenly said. "And here I thought you'd finally kicked the habit."

And just like that, the silence was dead. My shoulders loosened.

"If we're going to talk about that shitshow," I said, "you're cracking open the bottle first."

He laughed, taking a bite of his rabbit before groping blindly for the aragh.

"So hear me out," I began, "say you're a drow looking to become a god instead of your current gods, then the Dead King comes to offer you a hand. You know, just because he's such a good friend. What do you answer?"

The Warlord mulled on that.

"Pull the other one," he sagely answered.

"That sort of answer is why you ran out of hands, Hakram," I reproached. "But hey, at least you're smarter than someone who called themselves the fucking *All-Knowing*."

I got a laugh, a brutal crack about how he hoped they'd taught me how to dodge so I wouldn't run out of eyes like he had hands, and just like that I knew it was going to be a good night.

—

I went to bed smiling, even knowing what was ahead of me.

## **Interlude: Reputation**

*"Reputation is in the hand of others, but honour only in yours."*

— Levantine saying

Moro Ifriqui squinted through the Baalite eye at the horizon, then put it down to pat the neck of his Segovian shortmane. A beautiful beast, though he had never named her, and from a breed that the Brigand's Blood had been riding for more than a century. The Segovians were Procerans, but they were also old allies against the princes Orense. They had long traded fine horses and steel to Vaccei at generous prices so that their common enemy would continue to suffer raids at the southern border.

"Anything?" Siraj asked.

Moro's younger brother looked wary, as he often did these days. It had not yet strayed into cowardice so he had not spoken of it, but he would have to if the men noticed. The heir to Vaccei felt

for his brother, who only wanted to return to his wife and daughters, but the Brigand's Blood could not show weakness. Theirs were a hard people, and those who ruled over them must be harder still.

"Not yet," Moro said. "The dead send no vanguard."

None that he could see, anyhow. The poison clouds obscured much of the view.

"Would that Yannu Marave did the same," Siraj sighed.

Moro sent his brother a sharp look and the younger man – only by two years, but younger still – hurriedly straightened. None of the riders come with them had been close enough to hear, but it had been a risk.

"There will be honour to be found in the shield wall, vanguard or not," Moro evenly said.

"I await it eagerly," Siraj replied just as evenly. "Mayhaps I will even take a Revenant's head, tug honour my way instead of yours for once."

Moro nodded, satisfied, and guided his horse closer to his brother's.

"Mother will have you commanding the archers," he murmured. "You will hold them in your arms again, Siraj."

The younger man grimaced, twisting his face paint: umber brown and basil green, the Vengeful Brigand's own colours.

"It is not the dead that worry me," Siraj said, leaning closer and lowering his voice. "What Mother plans..."

Moro's jaw tightened.

"It is too late to hesitate," he replied. "The order has already been given."

A small cut and a quick poison. In the chaos of the fight neither be noticed. *It is necessary*, Moro reminded himself. *For our Blood, for our family*. It was a grim business, but grim was the business of the Brigand's Blood. Doing anything it took was how they'd survived without bending to Tartessos or Malaga when both were stronger. Poison, night ambushes, killings without honour. Sometimes even bargains with dark powers. Mother had never admitted outright, but she'd hinted enough he was sure the rumours about having paid the Marauder to kill Aquiline Osen's older brother were true.

"If we're caught, it is the end of us," Siraj murmured.

"If we do nothing," Moro tiredly said, "it is the end of us as well. Or do you think the Osená will end our blood feud after they claim the Tattered Throne with the Tanja?"

Siraj grimaced again, a silent concession. Razin Tanja was no enemy, but neither was he a friend. And with him so obviously taken with his betrothed, the old Ifriqui game of playing Malaga against Tartessos would find no purchase.

"Stay out of it and keep your silence, brother," Moro said, leaning close. "I'll do what needs to be done so you can go home to your family."

"You're my family too, Moro," Siraj softly replied.

Part of him ached to pull his brother close, to let him know it would be all right, but he knew he could not. Eyes were watching. *Eyes like poison, heart like stone*, the Anthem of Smoke went. *By his hand a thousand graves sown*. Honour to the Blood, Moro reminded himself. He was a son of Vaccei, and there weakness was death.

"Then listen to me," he replied.

Shaking his head, he carefully returned the Baalite eye to its leather sheath before glancing at his brother.

"Return to Mother," Moro ordered. "Tell her the dead advance without vanguard and I am riding to report this to Lord Marave personally as a courtesy."

She would know what it meant. He was, after all, following Itima Ifriqui's plan.

—

Yannu hated the smell here.

Even after the Lanterns burned the poison out of the air, even through the cloth mask, the Lord of Alava could smell a residual stench in the air. One not unlike the smell near the hill mines, the kind that stayed against the roof of your mouth and tasted of blood. He glanced at Rima, seeing that under the cloth she was scowling as well. Of all his cousins he had long liked Rima best, ever since they were children playing together in the grass. Though a Marave in name she was too far from the main line to be considered as his successor, but he had brought her up as much as he could when he came lord of Alava. She was the captain of his sworn swords, now, and the many scars she'd taken guarding his back had proved his trust to be without error.

"Do you remember," the Lord of Alava said, "the first time we ever saw the mines?"

Rima's scowl deepened, pulling at the scar that went through her left eyebrow. The red of it was just a shade different than the red of the Marave colours, though she was careful never to paint the ashen stipes close so it would not stand out.

"I remember thinking they were foul as Below's asshole," Rima said, "and that only a devil would send anyone in those pits."

"That makes me a devil, then," Yannu grunted.

"We are what we are," Rima shrugged, unconcerned.

He'd hated those mines too, as a boy. The sight of men and women going down into the pits to break their bodies breaking stone so ore could be ripped out of the earth had disgusted him. Yannu had never thought to inherit Alava as a boy, for though his great-aunt Sintra had named his father heir he had an older sister. But he had thought that when she became Lady of Alava he might speak to her of the mines and quarries. Of closing them, perhaps. Then a wound gone bad during an honour war with Malaga had taken her a year before his father fell to old age and Yannu Marava, Lord of Alava, had learned a bitter lesson.

His lands were known for orchards and cattle, but they alone were not enough for Alava to stand. Malaga had cattle herds as well and Levante's orchards almost as fine. It was the wealth hidden in the hills, the ores and the stone, that kept Alava's warriors in steel and the people fed through cattle-fevers and lean seasons. Mines and quarries were his blood's backbone, and to close them would be as breaking his own back. He had done what he could, sending prisoners to work instead of men of honour, but never closed a single one. The memory of that added an intimacy to his distaste for the scent, though the smell was not the only thing lately that had left a foul taste in the mouth.

He glanced to the east, where the banners of Tartessos and Malaga were raised together. The eastern flank of the column was shared by the warriors of the Slayer and Binder's blood. Rima followed his gaze without difficulty – she was even taller than him, though slimmer in build.

"The banners are nothing," his cousin said. "A gesture. It's the shield wall that worries me, Yannu. No one else has blended companies in our lifetime."

"They do the same with their skirmishers," Yannu grimly said.

Before going east into Praes, the betrothed pair had kept their captains separate. Malaga's warriors under Malagan captains, Tartessos' under their own. No longer. Warriors of both lands served under captains of either. Though Razin Tanja had claimed the measure had come from the losses in the Wasteland, that it had been simpler to blend companies than be forced to disband

some by insistence on keeping sworn warriors separate, Yannu knew it to be an excuse. The two youngbloods were tightening their alliance, getting their warriors used to fighting as one host.

And so those banners raised together to the east were one of the most dangerous things Yannu Marave had ever seen.

"You could have split them," Rima said. "You have the right."

He did. Lord Yannu Marave held command over all captains of the Dominion in this battle, twenty-seven thousand warriors marching in a loose column across the great dusty plains around Keter. Land that men called the Ossuary, after the many armies had died here only to rise again as a host of bones.

"It would have been a mistake," Careful Yannu said. "I do not hold the only command on the field, Rima. The Warlord and General Pallas would have seen through my reasons and word spread. That is more dangerous to us than leaving them together."

Too many people already had eyes on the Dominion. Yannu had been pleased of Rozala Malanza's coronation as First Princess, for their years of sharing a front had ensured he was closest to her of the Blood much as Itima Ifriqui had once been closest to First Prince Cordelia, but it was clear she had no intention to involve Procer in Levant's affairs after the war. It was the League that troubled him, for Empress Basilia was already making advances. She wanted the League of Free Cities to fill the void the Thalassocracy had left as the Dominion's closest ally and sign defence pacts against the Principate.

For such pacts to be signed there needed to be someone seated on the Tattered Throne, and that meant Basilia Katopodis had to gain in securing a quick succession should she be given an opening – and it would not be the Champion's Blood she backed, if it came to that.

Yannu would have liked to bargain with Callow, but he could not. The Black Queen was said to be fond of Razin and Aquiline, even rumoured to call them 'her lordlings' in council. She had even ensured they stood for Levant at the talks with the Dread Empire, an honour that had once belonged only to those of the Pilgrim's Blood. If she was brought in, where her favour would lie was clear as springwater. No, Yannu must keep other powers out of the matter at all costs: the only one likely to aid his cause had no hunger for getting involved. And that meant giving no excuse for the rest to involved themselves.

An excuse like weakening the Dominion's fighting strength because of internal matters.

"They did not fight me when I sought the command, Rima," Yannu continued. "That says much."

It meant neither Razin Tanja nor Aquiline had thought it worth a quarrel to have either of their names attached to a great battle against the dead instead of his. Worse, Yannu found he did not disagree with their decision.

The two of them had accolades enough to their name they did not need to take risks to earn more. They'd fought well before and during the great offensive in Hainaut, ending in the battle at the capital where Lord Razin – the weakest reputation of the two – was said to have faced a Scourge and lived. Since then the Black Queen had dragged them east into her campaign to settle Praes, where it was said they had fought with distinction at the Battle of Kala. After they had stood for Levant at the Tower's fall and the talks that followed, speaking for all of the Dominion as neither the Champion's or the Brigand's Blood ever had.

Most unsettling, though, was the distant amiability with the Barrow Sword. They'd pushed hard for the Bestowed to be given a chance to earn a place in the Rolls in the service of the Dominion, which looked to Careful Yannu like an alliance in the making.

"They're looking past the battles here," Rima grunted in agreement. "The boy, that. Aquiline's a fine killer but she thinks in blood and prize heads. Tanja's as clever as his father was."

And nowhere as proud, Yannu thought, which made him more dangerous. As Rima had grasped, they were preparing for the days after Keter, he understood, for what would come after the war. When the captains and their warriors returned home and the truce birthed by Cordelia Hasenbach came at an end. There would be blood, that much was certain, for the Tattered Throne stood without any Isbili left to claim it for the first time since the founding of the Dominion, coming with it the prize of rule over Levante: the largest, wealthiest city in all of Levant. Yannu knew it would come to war, for the heads of two great lines of the Blood were set to wed and with the Isbili dust there could be no better bid for the Tattered Throne than such an alliance.

And he had no intention of letting them make of the Dominion their kingdom.

There was noise behind him, so Yannu reined in his horse and glanced at Rima. She snorted and went to have a look, leaving the Lord of Alava to stare at the western flank of the marching column. There his own warriors and Vaccei's marched, distanced and under their own captains. Further west the great glittering snake that was the Clans under the Warlord was keeping up with his own host, while the thick of cataphracts under General Pallas screened the sides of both armies as they advanced. Rima returned quick enough he did not have time to grow bored by the sight.



"Moro Ifriqui's back from the scouting trip," she said. "Coming to report in person."

"Not necessary," Yannu frowned.

"The report, the man or the entire lot of them?" Rima drily replied.

He did not answer. Like most Alavans his cousin cared little for the Ifriqui, even less so now that his talks with them had come to nothing. His attempts to bind the Champion's Blood to the Brigand's in answer had been frustratingly unsuccessful. Yannu himself kept only to men, a preference shared by none of Itima's sons – the oldest of which, Moro, was over a decade younger than him anyhow – and though both lines had other kin the ages did not align. Itima's eldest granddaughter was three years old too young for any of his nephews, and though her youngest son was still unwed he was in his twenties while Yannu's oldest niece was twelve.

Matches further from the main line could be made, but to what purpose? They could not bind an alliance or hope to eclipse the prestige of a wedding between the Lady of Tartessos and the Lord of Malaga. That left their alliance one of circumstance, held together only by common enemies.

"They are allies still," the Lord of Alava finally said. "And have reason to remain so."

Itima and Aquiline hated each other like poison over the matter of the deaths of the Osen's brothers, so the Lady of Vaccei had much to fear from her enemy's ascension. Yannu himself had slain Akil Tanja in an honour duel, which would make Razin his enemy until death, though that was not the reason he opposed the youths.

"They're Ifriqui," Rima scathingly said. "They have no cause, not like you do. It's not hunger or fear that sets you against the married banners."

Yannu had no intention of seeking the Tattered Throne for himself or the Champion's Blood. He would prefer it if neither Itima nor her sons sat it either, though he might not get that choice. His preference would be for the Painted Knife or the Valiant Champion to be raised to rule of Levante as a reward, though he knew Rafaella would not be a popular choice. Though the Valiant Champion had gone as far as eschewing face paint to distance herself from the Marave even after Yannu had executed everyone involved in the betrayal, she was still a Champion. It would be seen by other lines as Yannu reaching for the Tattered Throne through a cheap trick. In truth, Yannu did not much care who sat the throne so long as it was neither of the betrothed.

They would be too strong, that was made their claim unacceptable. Malaga was second in wealth only to Levante due to its canal while Tartessos controlled the access to the Brocelian Forest and its treasures. If they gained Levante and through it mastery of the Gulf trade, they would hold the entire Dominion by the throat.

It was even worse than it looked, he had realized over the year of war. Alava traded the ore and stone of its hills to Levante for grain from its fertile fields, while Vaccei traditionally imported cattle and steel from Malaga and Levante. If the Tattered Throne fell into the hands of the betrothed, they would not need war to bring the rest of Levant to heel whenever they wished: they could simply close their doors and let their foes wither on the vine. The Majilis would grow meaningless, no longer a council of equals guided by the Holy Seljun but instead a court with a king and queen ruling over it. It would be the end of the Dominion, the dream sung of in the Anthem of Smoke.

*Let neither queen nor prince rule over our dominion,* the Grey Pilgrim's daughter and successor had pleaded, and for that plea Yannu would go to war. He was not certain, however, that he could *win* that war.

Though the alliance of Tartessos and Malaga was surrounded, to the north by Vaccei and to the south by his own Alava, it had strong bones. Malaga was wealthy and the home of the binders while Tartessos strengthened its forces with free captains and adventurers that tried their luck in the Brocelian. Even if Itima Ifriqui could be counted on to stand against them – which she could not, the Brigand's Blood were snakes and Itima the most cold-blooded of the nest – it promised to be a long, brutal slog of a war. The kind that broke realms. Better to kill one of the betrothed and snuff out the alliance before it took flight, Yannu had thought, and Itima had unsurprisingly agreed when he brought her into the plot. She'd already killed enough Osenas not to balk at one more.

But, after Moro was brought forward and discarded the excuse of the report to carry a message from his mother, Yannu's heart clenched with the cold fear that he might have made a mistake.

"This is drivel," the Lord of Alava flatly said.

Moro Ifriqui, eldest child to Lady Itima and heir to Vaccei, had a hard face that life had seen fit to further scar. The redness of them was striking against his brown and green face paint, as another stripe of colour.

"We must act now, Lord Yannu," Moro said, speaking his mother's words with his own mouth. "They will wed when Keter falls and killing them when victory is won will only draw more attention."

They were not yet married, Yannu thought, precisely to discourage knives being sent after them. Aquiline likely meant it a deed of honour, not beginning the fight when the Grand Alliance bound them all still, but Lord Akil's son had grown canny as his father. He had done it so that any attack on them would be seen as so thoroughly unprovoked it would draw the ire from all the world. And that was the very trap Itima was stepping into now.

"Neither can be killed while we war against the dead," Yannu said. "There will be trouble when we kill Tanja after the victory, but it will only be a stain on our reputation. To kill him *now* would be betraying the Grand Alliance."

"Only," Moro Ifriqui said, "if we get caught. We have men who-"

"Enough," the Lord of Alava harshly replied. "I have refused, Moro. There will be no arrow loosed."

The heir to Vaccei shrugged.

"That choice is no longer in your hands," he said.

Yannu considered killing him, then and there. The Ifriqui had come with only a small escort of riders and Yannu's own sworn swords were closer and better armed. None were close enough to overhear them speaking, which meant none would be close enough to stop him from slaying the other man should he strike first. It would cause much trouble and solve little, the Lord of Alava decided after a moment. Anger was not enough of a reason to kill.

"Should I warn them," Lord Yannu said, "your entire line could be ended today."

"You won't," Moro replied, appearing unworried. "If you try to bury us, we'll drag you into the grave with us. And it won't even matter if it's true: they'll use it to get rid of you regardless."

That was, the lord grimly thought, likely true. He had slain Akil Tanja in an honour duel, and though his son had forsworn vengeance that did not mean there was no enmity between them.

"We're in the same boat, Lord Yannu," Moro smiled. "So let's not fight, else we'll both end up in the water."

"This is not what we agreed," Yannu insisted.

And, to his shame, his eyes drifted to the side. Past the column of warriors, up in the sky where a lone silhouette flew in lazy circles. The Warden, on her black-feathered mount.

"She has greater worries than us," Moro said, following his gaze.

"Pray that she does," he replied.

It was a dismissal and the younger man heeded it. Too many risks, Careful Yannu thought, as he watched Moro's back and Rima returned to his side.

He would have to act.

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Map of the Kingdom of the Dead had remained largely the same over the last three centuries, though few of them extended far to the north of Keter itself. The most comprehensive extended all the way to the shores of the lake some called the Chalice and the outskirts of what was now known as the Duskwood, but rare were the maps that went any further. Mostly Ashuran ones, as the Thalassocracy's sailing ships sometimes circled the north of Calernia and their captains were particular about chart-making. The heartlands of the Kingdom of the Dead, though, were as much known territory as any land that was death on all who tread it could be.

It was why Hakram had several fine maps of the large plains surrounding Keter, the so-called 'Ossuary', coming from different nations.

He had halted to consult them atop a low hill, in particular an Arlesite map from the Ninth Crusade that bucked the reputation of Proceran maps being horribly unreliable by proving to be by far the most accurate of the lot. An hour past they'd marched across a long-dry riverbed that had been marked on it and no other parchment, which had only reinforced Hakram's trust in the mapmaker's work. The northwest of Keter had been fertile lands, once upon a time, and there were still traces of that. Dry riverbeds now only ever filled by rain were one, but there'd been more than grass and fields here during the days of Sephirah.

"That," the Warlord muttered, "could be trouble."

Sigvin leaned over his shoulder, peering at the parchment. She wore good chain mail that went up to her neck, hiding her ritual scars, and there was an axe at her hip. Unlike a warrior, though she had no shield. As a shaman, she was not to join the shield wall.

"What does the symbol mean?" she asked.

"Ruins," Hakram said. "The remnants of a city."

She looked understandably skeptical. Poison clouds obscured sight over long distances on the Ossuary, but a city so close to Keter would have been noticed. Troke Snaketooth, standing to the side of them and listening closely, looked as if he had an inkling.

"How old?" the chief of the Blackspears asked.

"Old enough there's no one left that speaks the language," Hakram replied. "There's almost nothing left and what remains is largely buried. I doubt anyone who notice the ruins without walking over them."

"And yet they are to be trouble," Oghuz the Lamé said, frowning.

The chief of the Red Shields had come out in warrior's mail, though he was unlikely to fight in the shield wall. Juniper's father was yet an able champion, though, and might choose a worthy fight to step into so that his clan would continue to hold his name in high regard.

"General Pallas sent word the dead are marching our way," the Warlord said. "At our current pace, in two hours we will clash over the ruins or close."

Hakram spat to the side, into the dust.

"The Hidden Horror does not deal in coincidences," he told them

Word would have to be sent. General Pallas and Lord Yannu should be told, he thought, but his eyes moved to the sky to the third in need of telling. A cloud of green hid away Catherine's distant silhouette but she was out there. Had been since dawn when they set out to march. The ruins were not from any of the thirteen great cities of ancient Sephirah, Hakram knew as much from their walk through the shards in Arcadia, but there had been other cities and towns in the kingdom – and there was no telling what the Dead King might have hidden in their ruins, buried under ash and dust.

And what the Warlord could not sniff out, the Warden might.

It would take more than a shout to reach her, but fortunately, Hakram had the means at hand. His gaze swept down the hill, where his warband had halted to wait for him while the rest of the warriors continued in the column led by Dag Clawtoe. A ring had formed, warriors leaning close as two people struggled, and the Warlord almost sighed. Hidir Bearkiller, a champion nearly seven feet tall with muscles like tree trunks whose favourite thing to do while drunk was be thrown into a pit with a steppe razor bear and kill it with his bare hands, yelped in pain cursed as Archer caught his thumb and began to bend it back. He gave in after there was an ominous crack, to the cheers of half the onlookers as Indrani beat her fourth consecutive challenger to the finger-game.

None of them had believed a human would have the strength to beat an orc at it, Named or not, which was why Hakram was now owed several bottles of Sleeping Bonesaragh no younger than five years.

"She is a menace," Oghuz complimented.

Juniper's father looked genuinely impressed. It was only a game, but the sight of Indrani twisting the arms of warriors with at least a foot on her repeatedly had made an impression.

"So far only to my champions," the Warlord drily replied.

He had assembled a warband of champions from all the clans as his retinue, since it would have been an insult to keep relying on the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields forever – if not to them, then to all his other followers. They were not as well trained as a Howling Wolves warband, even after regular drills, but the warriors had markedly improved. The heavy armour bought from Praes and reforged by clan blacksmiths had only made his warband of a thousand fiercer, though apparently only so that Archer might better maul them.

The devil in question was headed his way, strutting triumphantly after having clapped Hidir's back with affection, and Hakram rolled his eyes at her.

"Aren't you supposed to be with the Levantines?" he asked.

All the Blood had retinues to protect them, but there were enemies sworn swords could little again. Worry had been that the Hawk might try to bag one of the great lords of Levant during or after the battle, Archer had been brought along as much to keep the Blood alive as to face the Scourge. Losing any of them would be a hard blow to the Dominion morale, on top of a headache to sort out – neither Razin Tanja nor Aquiline Osenia had clear successors to their title.

"They're all over anyways, except for the lovebirds," Indrani easily replied. "Better to be out here where I can watch over the entire lot at once."

There was some sense in that. There was no telling when or from where the Hawk would loose its arrow, so taking the Scourge out before it shot was unlikely. Better for Archer to take a defensive posture and aim for the arrow instead of the Revenant. It was still, Hakram thought, a decision she would never have thought to make a few years ago. *You're changing*, he thought. It was a bittersweet thing, for it to happen only after he had left. The Warlord cut through the thought.

"I need you to send a message," Hakram said.

Indrani pointed upwards, cocking an eyebrow. He nodded.

"You know I'm always game for an excuse to shoot at Cat," Archer cheerfully said. "What do you need to say?"

Sigvin shot her a warm look, charmed by the romance of it. The mage from the Split Tree Clan had not met enough humans to know that violence did not usually take much of a role in their courting. Mind you, Hakram was not entirely sure she was wrong in this case.

"I'll write it down," the Warlord replied. "Wait for me."

"Sure, sure," Indrani dismissed, then slid a sly look at Sigvin. "So, Siggy, I hear tell you've been riding the Deadhand."

"I have," Sigvin nodded, then flashed a grin. "There are worse ways to pass the time."

Indrani laughed. He should, Hakram only now realized, never have allowed those two to meet. A tactical mistake of some weight had been made. One obvious enough even Troke shot him a sympathetic look.

"So *is* he any good?" Archer asked. "'cause Tordis said so back in Callow, but she was sweet on him I think and when a girl's sweet she-"

Hakram tactically retreated in search of ink and parchment before he could hear more. The quicker he was rid of Archer the better.

—

General Pallas whistled loudly, her escort smoothly coming to a halt around her as they joined with the riders that had been awaiting her. The word from the outriders had been interesting enough that she had decided to come in person even as word was sent to the other commanders. Her kataphraktoi had told it true, she saw with her own eyes. The dead had ceased their march. Across the plains an army of the dead stood in silence, arrayed in a firm battle line with a reserve at the back and constructs to the side where a living host would place cavalry.

Behind them all, looming tall as a mountain, the Crab belched out smoke that filled the sky,

"They do not advance when provoked?" Pallas asked, turning towards Captain Dion.

The young man led the outriders, and had been the one to first send word.

"Not even when we enter bow range," Captain Dion confirmed.

It seemed, General Pallas thought, that the dead had chosen where they would give battle. In the distance behind her, she saw the trail of dust from the advancing columns of the orcs and the Levantines. Less than an hour away now. The Warlord had not

mentioned what the ancient city said to be buried near here was called, if Deadhand knew at all.

"A simple name, then," Pallas mused. "The Battle of the Ruins should do nicely."

## Interlude: Honour

*"It is indeed true, Chancellor, that the greatest possible victory is over yourself. My magical doubles proved to be the worthiest of my opponents by far."*

– Dread Empress Gemini (possibly Gemini II, never conclusively proved not one of the doubles)

Razin Tanja watched the distant line of the horizon, sitting the saddle, and wondered about the nature of change. How it was embraced and how it was fought, how it was cursed and how it was sought. It was not, he had come to think, a matter of people being good or bad. Sometimes bad men fought for good causes, necessary causes. Sometimes good women did terrible things, because they did not think of them as being terrible at all.

It was, Razin thought, like standing in a tower. If the inside of it was all you had ever known, the world was divided by the levels of it. You'd think in terms of top and bottom, of stairs and doors, and never consider there could be anything else at all. Only if you'd stepped outside of it, even once, suddenly it would all seem so silly. What did a level or another matter, when you had seen a mountain or the sea?

But then who could conceive of a mountain or the sea, when all they had ever seen was the inside of a tower?

No, it was not about good and bad. It was about whether you had gotten a glimpse of the world outside the tower or not, and what that glimpse did to you. For Razin that journey had begun a bridge outside the city of Sarcella, when the great monster of their age had told him to learn from his mistakes or die in a ditch. It had ended when he'd looked at a woman he'd already been half in love with about to fight Yannu Marave to the death in his honour and seen nothing but futility.

A shameful, ugly waste that somehow everyone around him insisted was honour.

"But it was just blood," Razin murmured.

But that was Levant, wasn't it? Blood and honour, two sides of the same coin. The glory and the slaughter, so deeply intertwined they might as well be the same thing. And so Razin would not think in terms of good and bad, today. That was not the bone of



it, the vein. It was about the tower, and how many people had stepped outside of it. Been dragged outside of it by this war.

About how far people would be willing to go, to go back in and close the door behind them.

—

There was a trap here, Hakram Deadhand thought, even if he was yet blind to it.

The Warlord was not a general in the way of others he knew and had known, more Nauk than Juniper, but he was a graduate of the War College and had fought in campaigns that would be studied for centuries to come. To his practiced eye the battle line of the enemy was a recipe for a rout, or at least severe defeat since the dead did not flee even when beaten. Keter's centre was weak a weak half circle, only six lines of skeletons deep, and the sheer weight of a charge from Levantine heavy foot — Alava's was particularly strong, entire companies heavily armed with plate and hammers — should plow right through.

The enemy had thickened its flanks instead, as much as thirty of the forty-five thousand it numbered split between the two. The rest, four thousand or some, was held in reserve behind the curved centre. Hakram was not as well-read as some in matters of tactics, but the formation smacked to him of the tactics of the Iron Prince at the Battle of Aisne, the overwhelming Lycaonese victory that had won Cordelia Hasenbach the throne. On that field Klaus Papenheim had drawn in a larger coalition of southerners deep past his flanks by letting his centre give ground before halting the retreat and falling around the flanks for an encirclement.

When he told Troke as much, the chief of the Blackspears spat to the side with a skeptical look.

"Won't work here," Troke Snaketooth replied. "The Dominion will keep charging and even if the undead send in their reserve it'll be torn through."

Which would leave the two strong flanks of the enemy army split and prone to being encircled in turn, a defeat in the making.

"So it's bait," the Warlord gravelled.

Hakram was not surprised. He had asked General Pallas to take a closer look at the grounds near the enemy and her riders had found that behind the battle line there were hints of the long-buried city that had once stood here. The thick of the ruins behind the curve of the enemy formation, within the hollow of the half circle. The general the Dead King had sent to command here must want their own centre to collapse, Hakram thought, for the

Levantines to continue charging forward right into some sort of nasty trap that would shatter them and turn the battle around in a single stroke.

He'd written as much to Catherine, which was why he had been baffled when he had learned that she'd sensed a few undead under the ground where the city would be but no gathered power whatsoever. As far as she could tell, there weren't even any constructs: just a handful of Bones. Hakram began trading messengers back and forth with Lord Yannu and General Pallas in the wake of that, their armies slowed to a halt far enough the enemy would not be able to steal a march on them. Not that they seemed willing to leave the 'defensive' position they'd taken.

"If we march away," General Pallas suggested, "they might follow us away from their position."

It was a sensible enough thought and the Grand Alliance attempted it, but the enemy did not move to follow. It only made the trap more obvious, but the enemy general knew the same thing they did: they could not afford to leave without fighting that army. If they pulled back too far there would be nothing to stop the dead from going around them and striking at the camps from behind while they were trying to storm the walls of Keter, a recipe for slaughter. And there was no doubt at all that the dead would march faster, because unlike the living they did not tire and standing in the sun wearing armour for hours would not exhaust them.

So the army turned back, taking its old position after having burned a little over an hour.

"Our purpose is to keep their army here," Hakram told the others. "We can achieve it simply by standing here and facing them without actually waging a battle."

Only, as Careful Yannu sent back in message, it wasn't that simple. If they stayed too late, they would be stuck out in the Ossuary away from reinforcements in the dark, having no idea about the state of the coalition army that'd tried to storm Keter. Given that Proceran outriders had made it clear that there were still other armies of the dead gathering out in the plains, they would be running the risk of Keter throwing all those half-assembled forces at them from the sides while the army in front of them attacked them in the dark. That was potentially disastrous.

"We fight," Lord Yannu sent.

"We fight," General Pallas agreed.

"We fight," the Warlord conceded.

There was no other way but to give battle, so all that was left was to find a way to do it without giving the Dead King what he wanted.

—

The wait was getting to them all.

Ishaq had chosen his band with care, knowing that he might never get an opportunity like this again, and he was still pleased with the plan he had decided on. It was a simple thing, as most functional plans tended to be. The Grave Binder to find the Scourge and reach them, the Vagrant Spear to close the distance, the Stained Sister to hold them down, himself for the killing blow and the Harrowed Witch to handle their retreat. Lord Hanno had been generous in releasing the two heroines to his service for the battle, seemingly uncaring that the deed of killing a Scourge today would see Ishaq added to the Rolls. The once-Knight appeared interested only in the end of one of the Dead King's finest Revenants, indifferent to all other consequences.

A hard man to grasp, Hanno of Arwad. He acted weak where he should be strong, acted strongly where he should give. The Barrow Sword had refined his understanding in Salia, when he'd crossed swords with the Ashuran, but even now he was often unsure whether the hero was being clever or not. This band, for one. Ishaq had fought at the side of Sidonia and Aspasia before, facing the Drake together in Hainaut, and knew them well enough. So he'd anticipated that Sidonia would hold the Grave Binder in contempt, for the man in tattered robes was visibly rotting from a barrow-curse. A contempt that would be returned in kind, as Idris saw her as a hound of the Blood.

But he had not thought, however, that the Stained Sister would be as oil and water with the Harrowed Witch. Both Procerans were survivors of the Dead King's advance, but neither cared for the way the other had survived. Aspasia had only disdain for the Sister staying among the living only because she had been buried among so many corpses the dead had forgot her, while the old heroine had not been shy in castigating the Witch over the sacrifice of her own brother to power an illusion that would let her flee unseen. Ishaq had twice been forced to demand silence as the bickering escalated towards thrown hands, wondering all the while if somewhere Hanno of Arwad might not be laughing at him.

Now all stood in sullen silence among the throng of Alavan armsmen, their faces hidden by simple soldier's cloaks. Warriors gave them a wide berth, as much out of respect for Bestowed as the stink that came from Idris' rotting flesh. It really was an awful smell, Ishaq thought to himself. The Grave Binder had told him that being ever dying deepened his hold over death, but even Idris admitted that the barrow had exacted from him a deep price for the rings that taught him his learning.

"I hope people will stop marching all around soon," the Harrowed Witch muttered, breaking half an hour of silence. "I'm getting a headache watching them."

"How little it takes to-" the Stained Sister began, hands folding into the sleeves her red-stained garments, but Ishaq's hard look put a stop to that.

Like children, sometimes. As if just standing in the vicinity of each other was enough to drive each other mad.

"The hosts are getting in formation," Sidonia told them, sounding distracted as she spoke.

The Vagrant Spear was looking at the same 'marching around' that Aspasie had complained of. Ishaq was no captain of warbands himself, but he too could see that Careful Yannu and the Warlord had been moving around their armies in preparation of the battle. The Clans had split in two, taking the flanks, while Levant tightened the centre. Why he was not sure, and it was not his trouble to bother with. The Barrow Sword had come here to hunt.

"Movement?" he asked Idris.

The Grave Binder was picking at his wrist, gazing off in the distance, but when addressed returned to the present. The Bestowed's fingers went to the glittering bronze rings on his left hand, a small shiver of power touching the air.

"Four Revenants in the army," Idris said. "In pairs. And the two out in the field haven't moved for the last hour."

"Could be the Hawk and an escort," Sidonia facing Ishaq directly and refusing to acknowledge the other man's existence.

It was a grim source of amusement to the Barrow Sword that though he too had stolen from a barrow, a few hard fights back-to-back had seen this offence to honour forgiven while Idris would be scorned to the grave and likely even beyond. Sidonia was not from a noble line, not having any of the Spear's blood even though she had inherited the Bestowal, but she had been welcomed warmly by the greats of the Dominion and so eagerly adopted their hypocrisies. Idris had done little that those of the Brigand's Blood had not surpassed in horror a dozen times over, but a darkened Bestowal and enmity with the Binder's Blood meant he must be deserving of death.

That would change, after the war. Ishaq would see to it. And that change would begin with his being the first villain to ever added to the Rolls.

"It could also be bait," the Barrow Sword replied. "We wait."

Some dissatisfaction at that, but none challenged him. He was representative for the champions of Below, though the title in his hands did not command the same respect as it had in the Black Queen's. No matter. Soon the Scourges would reveal themselves, trying to snatch some great name's life, and then his time would come.

Like all Bestowed before him, Ishaq would write his entry in the Rolls blood-red.

—

Aquiline Osená shaded her eyes with her hand, peering at the enemy as the sun pounded down on her helm.

By habit she glanced through the ranks for a head worth taking, some great captain or Revenant, but much as she hated to admit it the days where she could wade into the thick of the slaughter were past. She was only twenty-two, young enough that there should still be many years for her to slay great names and bring back their skulls to the Silent Shrine, but as Razin kept saying if either of them died then all hope of change for the Dominion would die with them. It was still frustrating to hear, and if he had not been clever enough to save that kind of talk for when they were naked and sated she might have quarrelled with him for it.

The Grim Binder's Blood made for canny men, it was known.

No, now her eyes were meant for different prizes. As the years passed she had become the leading captain of their host, her betrothed taking a step back and to instead hold command of reserves or the camp. Razin was not without talent as war captain, Aquiline believed, but she would not deny he did not have the knack for it that some were born with – like Abigail the Fox or Rozala Malanza. Yet in the Dominion none were held as Yannu Marave's equal when it came to leading warriors, which was part of why Razin had stepped back. *If it comes to war, Razin had said, it will be you that leads our captains. Best you and they get used to it.*

He really was sweet, Aquiline thought, still pleased at the memory. She toyed with a strand of hair, smiling, but was brought out of the reverie by a cleared throat. Captain Elvera was looking at her, worn face pulling into a cheeky grin.

"Not even wed and already losing your head," the old captain said, shaking her head. "What would your father say?"

"That at least I had the sense never to fuck a Proceran," Aquiline replied, entirely unashamed.

"I just taught him how to handle an axe," Elvera lied.

The Lady of Tartessos still found it wildly entertaining that Elvera had slept with one of spymasters of Procer back when they were young. She'd also been relieved it wasn't the dead traitor or the one that looked like a skeleton with dry skin hung on it, since it would have called her old teacher's tastes into question. In the distance a deep horn sounded – deeper even than those of the Army of Callow, which Aquiline knew well – and the sound called them back to order. Her eyes returned to the enemy's ranks, still finding the same conclusion laying there to be found.

"If we charged we'd tear right through them," Aquiline Osená stated. "Their centre is thin and thin on shields."

"Which their captain wants of us," Elvera agreed. "That formation is too odd for it to be otherwise."

By the count of the outriders, the dead numbered over forty thousand. Likely closer to forty-five, the kataphraktoi had claimed, but they could not be sure given the way the enemy kept some of its troops hidden at the back. That meant the numbers of the Grand Alliance were higher: fifty-three thousand had set out with down and marched to this field, all in all. Twenty-seven thousand for the Dominion, twenty-three thousand orcs and three thousand kataphraktoi under General Pallas. It was rare for the dead to fight when their numbers were the lesser, given that Bones were hardly better than even Proceran levies as soldiers, but rarer still for the dead to stand on the defence.

And that was what Aquiline's eyes were telling her: the dead were still preparing to defend, not attack.

"I can't see the sense in it," Aquiline admitted.

"A trap of some sort," Elvera replied. "It's why Careful Yannu sent orders that we are to hold the centre but not break through."

"He didn't thin our numbers, though," the Lady of Tartessos replied, frowning. "Which he means he's worried about *them* breaking through *us*."

There could not be many reasons for that. Both their gazes moved to the Crab as their thoughts flowed down the same path. The monster was gargantuan, as were all of its kind, but this one was not like the others Aquiline had glimpsed. It was not a city on great spindly legs, workshops and smithies and dens of sorcery protected by walls, but instead entirely a creature of war. The mountain of death belched trails of smoke from great bonfires that looked like a thousand eyes, the air wavering from the heat around it, and from all sides extruded paired and massive folded tusks of steel. Aquiline could see in her mind's eye how they would unfold, turning into cutting lines that would carve through

a man's height across the length of half a mile as the monster advanced.

"We have our own monster, my lady," Elvera finally said, nodding upwards. "And if it comes to a scrap, I'll bet on ours."

Aquiline refrained from looking up, looking for the silhouette of the crow and her rider. It would have felt childish, like a child tugging at her mother's skirt. A feeling she resented all the more for knowing the Warden was not much older than her. Not that one would know, from the way she carried herself: halfway between a sage and a lunatic, but ever a step ahead of her foes.

"She said she would handle it, so she will," Aquiline simply said.

Her worries had to be on the ground, where steel would clash. The orders had come from Careful Yannu and the Grand Alliance army had at last finished taking a formation of its own. The captains of the Dominion had taken the centre, Aquiline's own armsmen and those of Malaga in the middle while Alava stood on one side and Vaccei the other. The Clans had agreed to hold the flanks, Warlord Hakram taking the left flank while an orc by the name of Troke Snaketooth took the right. General Pallas' kataphraktoi were being kept in reserve at the back, along with eight thousand mixed foot from the Clans and the Dominion – the four thousand Levantines there under Razin's command, while Oghuz the Lamé held it the orcs.

It was a large reserve, but Aquiline approved of the caution. There was something afoot. In the distance the deep horns of the Clans sounded once more, soon after answered by the beat of Levantine war-drums. Aquiline breathed out, rolling her shoulders, and straightened her back. Her sword left the sheath easy as a breath and she raised the steel until it gleamed in the sun's light.

"*Forward*," Aquiline Osená shouted, and across the dusty plain warriors began to march.

—

The Warlord was not in the thick of it when the lines collided.

For now he was still of more use behind, watching the greater currents of the battle. Time for the axe-song would come soon enough. Instead he watched as the shield wall of his flank collided with that of the dead, his warriors smashing through the dead with axe and sword. Orc were larger than human, heavier, and found it easier to land the kind of blows that shattered skeletons. The other side of that, which became visible soon enough, was that the Clans lacked the discipline of the Army of Callow. The line became uneven in moments, finer warriors digging

deeper into enemy lines, and the disorders gave room for the dead to bite.

They would kill more of the enemy, Hakram thought, but more would die as well.

"The centre's doing well," Sigvin opined. "The Levantines aren't pushing further than they should."

They *had* pushed back the enemy some, the Warlord saw, but not much and their captains were holding back the men. It had blunted the head of the half circle but little more than that. Lord Yannu's plan had been simple enough: since they were certain that what the dead had planned laid in the ruins, then to avoid the trap all they must do was avoid taking those grounds. The enemy centre would shatter itself on the Grand Alliance's, and then the majority of the Dominion army could swing around to take from the side the flanks that Hakram's warriors would have nailed down. And, in case a mistake had been made, a large reserve was being kept back.

Mitigated risk, Hakram had thought when he first heard it. A plan worthy of a man called Careful Yannu.

Movement drew his attention to the side. He and Troke had ordered their shield walls to be ten men deep, to stretch the line and prevent easy encirclement by the larger undead flanks, but it wasn't the Bones that were worrying him. Against these, Hakram would send his warriors all day without a second thought. It was the constructs, which had been waiting patiently to the sides as the shield walls impacted and the troops committed to the clash. And now, the Warlord saw, they were beginning to move.

"Fuck," Sigvin whispered, "but ghouls are quick."

"Keter uses them as replacement for cavalry," Hakram replied, eyes following the same curve as hers.

Thousands of flesh abominations ran on four legs, circling around the orcish shield wall to hit it from the side, but Hakram's chiefs had been warned. They back lines pulled away and formed another shield wall facing the ghouls. It was the larger constructs that drew his eye, though. Beorns and Tusks, great bears with bellyfuls of dead and boar-like abominations instead filled with *rocks*. The enemy seemed to lack drakes, save for a few circling above as watchers, and there had been no swarm unleashed. There were no insects to kill and raise, out in the Ossuary: all life had been snuffed out centuries ago.

"There they go," the Warlord grimly said as the larger constructs began to move.



The enemy's plan became obvious soon enough. The ghouls were keeping the new, thin shield wall pinned while Beorns circled around towards it. Though Hakram's warriors were holding the ghouls at bay handily, returning the favour in kind when throats were torn out by fang, the line was not steady. The Beorns would blow holes into it and then pour out skeletons in the holes. As for the Tusks, they slowly began to advance but their destination was not yet clear.

"Are you sure we can trust them?" Sigvin suddenly asked.

"Against the dead? Always," the Warlord replied.

On Troke's flank, the assembled shamans of the Clans unleashed their sorceries onto the approaching Beorns. Waves of fire and frost, withering curses that turned flesh to stone or exploded in waves of bronze sorcery. But there were only so many mages among Hakram's kind, not enough for both flanks. So the Warlord had bargained for reinforcements: as the great abominations approached the line, small bands darted out of the orcish shield wall. A heartbeat later blinding flares burst as the lodges of Lanterns did what they did best: savage giant monsters with the most warlike applications of Light on all of Calernia.

Blinding beams and pale fire, spears and axes and javelins. The priests of Levant, singing the same war hymns they had for centuries, tore wildly into the Dead King's monsters.

"Good priests," Sigvin reluctantly conceded.

Hakram did not answer, eyes on the Tusks. They had yet to charge, still moving around without clear purpose. Held back for now? It would make sense. There were no better constructs in the arsenal of Keter to shatter shield walls, best to use them when they would strike the hardest. But that meant his use as a watcher had come to an end. The tall orc reached for his helm, pulling down on his head and tightening the clasp. The shamaness sent him a bright look.

"Into the fight?" she eagerly asked.

"It's time," the Warlord agreed. "I'll lead my warband to-"

Hakram did not finish the sentence and came close to never finish anything ever again. The arrow had fallen down in utter silence, grey and unseen, only for the middle of the shaft to be hit by another arrow five feet away from his throat. He went very still, for a moment, but no other arrow came.

"I owe Indrani a drink," Hakram Deadhand said, and reached for his axe.

There was no hiding where the arrow had come from.

"I have them," the Grave Binder said.

Ishaq drew Pinon, the blade keening eagerly.

"We move," he ordered.

Sidonia laughed, Aspasia moaned and the Stained Sister's face hardened. With the collision of the lines they had been forced back behind the Alavan shield wall, but now they passed through it and into the thick of the dead. Ishaq and Sidonia took the lead, the Barrow Sword smashing through the shield raised in his way while the Vagrant Spear deftly leapt over another and scattered the dead into bones with a burst of Light. The two of them kept making room, clearing the dead in a storm as the rest of their band crossed the shield wall and it closed behind them. They had been quick, but they were fighting a sea and within moments the dead were pressing against them.

"*Idris*," Ishaq called out.

"Eyes, ears, tongue," the Grave Binder hurriedly chanted in Lunara. "I who hold dominion over the dead claim my tax: let none with eyes behold me."

There were many among Bestowed who thought Idris worthy of mockery, for like other sorcerers of the Dominion his magic could not destroy swaths of foes like that of Praesi and Callowan mages. He was a maker of curses and a necromancer, which had only earned him further mockery as his skill proved inferior to the Dead King's and he failed to steal control of undead from the Hidden Horror. That was missing, Ishaq had found, the true strength of his Bestowal. His mastery over death was not simple necromancy, it was a deeper power – and that truth was expressed by the way Idris, alone of all the sorcerers of Calernia, could wave curses that affected even undead.

Such as hiding from their eyes a band of five Bestowed as they snuck through an entire army of the dead.

The Barrow Sword had known from the beginning that fighting his way to the Scourges when they hid in the middle of an army would see his band spent by the time the clash began, so he'd ensured they wouldn't need to fight at all. The Bestowed wove their way through the packed ranks of the enemy, elbowing skeletons and ducking the shadow of great abominations as they heeded Ishaq's order not to destroy even a single one – lest the Dead King be able to find them through the destruction. They hurried as much as they could, the sensation of moving unseen oddly empowering after the Barrow Sword grew used to the vulnerability, and the Grave Binder guided them straight to the Revenants.

"The three Revenants are clustered together," Idris whispered.

"What happened to the fourth?" Ishaq frowned.

"Suddenly destroyed while it was trying to join the others," the Grave Binder replied.

The Barrow Sword traded a look with Sidonia.

"The Lady's in fine form today," she cheerfully said, openly pleased.

Was she ever not? Ishaq still remembered her methodically taking the Red Knight apart with knives, making a show of a woman capable of cracking stone walls with her bare hands. He knew well he would have lost that fight in her place, one of the many reasons it paid to remain on good terms with the Woe. The Warden required so little of her allies that Ishaq was frequently baffled she did not have more villains in her service – refraining from excesses was a cheap price for her friendship. Keeping to her rules had seen a cordial truce brokered between him and the rising force in Levant as reward.

The Black Queen hadn't been subtle about making them work together, but then why bother when she had the authority to do as she wished? He'd have that too, one day. The power to give an order going against centuries of custom and rightly expected to be obeyed. Some mornings he woke up so hungry for it his belly ached.

"There," Idris suddenly said. "Behind the beorn. Get ready."

"Sidonia," Ishaq called out.

"Honour the Blood," the Vagrant Spear shouted back, leaping atop the massive bear.

She was gone in a moment as the Barrow Sword went around, Aspasia and the Stained Sister following closely. The Grave Binder was further behind, already whispering his next spell. Idris' curses could not fool Revenants, who the Dead King empowered beyond his ability to trick, but he would keep all other undead away from them for as long as he could. They had until the Grave Binder faltered to make their kill and ready themselves for retreat. Ishaq turned the corner a moment later, watching as Sidonia struck at their enemies in the flash of Light, and counted three.

In the back, the Hawk was fleeing.

In front of them, two identical silhouettes in armour stood. Iron from head to toe, the helms shaped like the heads of wolfhounds. The Wolfhound, then, and a fake. The strongest defence of the Scourges, covering the Hawk's retreat. Ishaq rolled his shoulder,

Pinon singing as she cut through the air. The Hawk was for the Archer to handle anyhow, he would make do with this one.

"Honour to *me*," Ishaq the Barrow Sword grinned, and stepped into the fight.

—

Yannu had taken the time to consider how he would do it, if he were Itima Ifriqui, and decided it would be a man from Tartessos.

Though the Lady of Vaccei was taking a black gamble by attempting Razin Tanja's assassination during a battle, she was a fool. She was, he had mused, simply used to getting her way. How many dozens of times had she rid herself of foes using the cover an honour war or a hunting day? How many had she poisoned and ordered slain in the night? Itima Ifriqui had killed Blood before and gotten away with it. Her failure was that she had not grasped the danger courted by breaking the treaties of the Grand Alliance. Razin's death would not be pursued by a few spies or a single Bestowed: the Warden herself would look into such a killing.

And there was no telling how far Catherine Foundling was able to reach for answers.

Still, Itima would know that if she were blamed for Lord Razin's death she would be facing the bitter vengeance of a widowed Aquiline Osená and a furious Binder's Blood, whose armies would both come for Vaccei to scour it as harshly as the Principate once had. So Itima must set Tartessos against Malaga in the aftermath, and there was opportunity for that. Several captains in Osená service had been bitterly disappointed by Aquiline's betrothal, having hoped to win her hand through honour, and there were even more who had lost kin fighting against the Malagans over the rich lands between the two cities. A grudge would not be too difficult to forge as a reason for the killing.

As the two betrothed kept their warriors in blended companies, finding a hand to do the deed was as easy as finding a Tartessos warrior foolish enough to think they might get away with it and greedy enough to believe the riches promised would be given. No doubt Itima had given out some gold as proof she would pay the whole, using the coin to tie the killer to whichever Tartessos man she wanted blamed for the deed. Yannu's first trouble was that there could be no telling who it was that the Bandit's Blood had bent to their purpose. It could be any of hundreds, and Razin's command in the reserves meant he was near too many warriors to count.

Yannu's second trouble was that he did not want Itima Ifriqui to be caught.

The Lord of Malaga had no doubt she would follow through on the threat Moro had carried, that she would drag him down as well if she was to be killed. And even if she was not, recklessly as she was acting Itima was still his only ally in checking the rise of his enemies. She must then be stopped without being outed, else it all come down on both their heads. Fortunately, though there could be many assassins there was only one life they were after. There lay Yannu's opportunity, and the way he could yet turn this to his advantage.

"I need you by Razin Tanja's side," Yannu told his cousin.

Rima blinked in dismay.

"Now?" she replied. "Yannu, we're fighting a battle."

Only half true. The two of them were well behind the lines, with his sworn swords, and not likely to fight until the enemy centre was broken and the Clans were to be reinforced.

"Now," he agreed. "Itima's being rash. She wants to kill Razin Tanja."

His cousin let out a low whistle.

"That's going to get a lot of people killed," Rima said, sounding impressed in the worst way.

"Too many," Yannu agreed. "So I'm sending you to him, as a veteran to help him decide when to send in the reserves."

"But not to kill him," she tried.

"Keep him alive at all costs," the Lord of Alava replied. "I believe Itima'll be using a Tartessos man to do the deed, so watch them closely."

"So I'm to constantly keep my hand on my sword for an hour or two around a gaggle of jumpy Tanja armsmen," Rima grimaced. "There's a pleasant fucking time in the making."

"Yes," Yannu said, unapologetic. "But most important is that when the assassin is revealed, you must seem them killed."

Silencing the hand being used was crucial. With no tongue left to wag and no dead Tanja to prompt a deeper look by the likes of the Warden, the only trail left to follow would be the one Itima was sure to have laid pointing towards Tartessos. Rima might even win the Champion's Blood some honour by saving Razin's life, if she was quick enough.

"And when the armsmen ask why I looked at every Tartessos man twice all afternoon just before an assassin tried his luck?" Rima asked.

"I will settle that," the Lord of Alava said. "Simply tell them I had heard there might be an attempt and sent you to make sure he would live."

He'd have to create a believable way as to how he might have caught out a treacherous Tartessos captain, but it should not be impossible. Especially with Lady Itima's help, which she would be forced to give him if she did not want to get caught out having had a hand in any of this. Rima slowly nodded.

"You're sure?" she quietly asked.

"We still need the Brigand's Blood," Yannu admitted. "If we lose Vaccei, it is finished."

Alava could not win alone. It could fight, and might even follow him into that fight to the bitter end, but that the end would be bitter there was no doubt. That meant Itima Ifriqui must live through her blunder, even if he had to cross her to see it done.

"Then it's done," Rima said, clasping his arm.

Yannu clasped it back, pulling her close before releasing her. He was not pleased to send her away, but there was no one else he would trust this two. She had trained her right hand to serve as captain of his sworn swords in her absence, should it come to a fight, knowing she might be sent away on duties such as this. As she left his sight, vanishing into the crowd of armed men, the Lord of Alava turned back to the unfolding battle. It was, to his eye, going well. The enemy centre was teetering on the brink of collapse, having spent itself on his people's shield wall, and though the dead were mounting among the Clans they were holding strong.

The shield wall on the right flank was bending after having been thinned by the Beorns that had survived the sorcery of the orcs, but it looked in no danger of collapse. On both sides the ghouls were being thinned and it looked as if the Warlord had rallied warriors to go on the *attack* against them. *He's to curve around the shield wall after*, Yannu saw. Using on the dead the very same manoeuvre they had wanted to use on him. The Bestowed's very presence seemed to light a flame in the orcs, he saw, and not only the well-armoured ones he used as his sworn swords.

Wherever the Warlord stood vigor seemed to bleed back into tiring warriors, and they chewed up the dead like a closing maw.

It was worth keeping in- Yannu threw himself down from his horse, his armsmen closing around him with shields raised, but as he landed in the dust and his mount whinnied he saw there had been no need. The arrow he had glimpsed mere feet away from him had been shot out by another, taken in flight.

"Archer," one of his sworn swords said, and there were murmurs of agreement.

That and respect. The shot that might have killed Yannu had been madness, but it was madder still to have shot *it*. The Lord of Alava declined help to climb back the saddle, more bruised in pride than body, and returned to watching the battle. The centre was slightly further forward than he would prefer, but it had been too much to expect a fighting line to be too strictly observed. He was more concerned by the Tusks that still waited behind the enemy's flanks, not yet engaged even though on both sides the orcs were no longer losing grounds. When were they to strike, if not now? An instinct born of long experience had his eyes straying back to the centre, and there he saw it.

Just a moment too late.

The ground collapsed. The entire hollow he had been so wary of, the ruins under ground, had been nothing but a great sand trap. As the handful of dead the Warden had senses below brought down some pillar or another the entire cavern collapsed, turning into a massive pit. A few hundred of the warriors too far forward fell along with the entire enemy centre, though unlike the undead they would not be getting back up from that fall. And now he understood the trap the Enemy had laid, at long last. It'd been too obvious from the start, but that had been the trick: Yannu had never been meant to walk into the collapsing grounds.

He had been meant to keep his army in the wring place because of it.

Already he saw it laid out before him. Two flanks, the orcs holding but slowly losing to the dead on both. His centre, the Dominion forces, had been meant to reinforce the Clans by attacking the flanks once the enemy centre was broken. They would have gone both through the freed centre and through the back, preparing to encircle with the orc warriors as the anchor. Only now half the path was a pit Yannu's warriors could not march through, and the back path meant circling all the way around the orc shield lines while most of the Dominion army was facing the wrong way.

And he couldn't even do that, Yannu Marave realized, because behind him the reserves had yet to be committed and they were still in the way.

On the other side of the pit, the enemy reserve – which had stood right outside the edge of the fall – began to advance. On the flanks the Tusks turned as one, facing the shield walls of the Clans, and began to charge.

And over the entire army, for the first time since the battle had begun the Crab took a step forward.

—

“Hold,” Aquiline Osená shouted. “*Hold.*”

The shield wall wavered despite her screams, despite the way she had left the saddle and gone to stand with her warriors. And though Aquiline kept a face of calm, she was glad that the paint she wore from head to toe hid the sheen of her sweat. The fear that was seizing the shield wall was in her blood too, ice pooling in the belly. What else was she to feel, watching the Crab walking towards them one sickening step at a time? The great abomination’s spindly legs, as repulsive as the scuttling legs of some vermin for all that they were taller than towers, crossed the great pit with ease. All over the carapace of stone and bone the fire-eyes burned, spewing out ever-longer tongues of flame that kept burning on the ground after falling in droplets.

When the Crab got close enough, dozens would be incinerated in a heartbeat with every plume of liquid fire.

Yet it was not the fire that had her warriors inching back, bending away from the sharply inclined pit where hundreds of their comrades had fallen to their death mere moments ago. It was the husks of steel, the strident grinding sound they made as they unfolded and slammed down. The Crab was only halfway through the pit, but already the razor-length hung in the air before the shield wall. At head-height. What shield could possibly hope to turn back such a massive blade? It would pass through the shield wall like a knife through butter, making mist of men. Three hundred feet. Two hundred feet. One hundred feet.

“Hold,” Aquiline shouted again, but her voice wavered.

Her weight was leaning back as well, her body eager to flee even if her heart still hesitated. What had once been the enemy’s centre was digging itself out of the ash and dust, the dead crawling out as they began to climb the slope towards her warriors, but worse than them was the enemy’s reserve. It was proceeding down the slope of the pit in good order, staying in formation as it moved. *The broken centre to hold us, the reserve to break us*, she thought. All the while the dead tried to break the flanks and collapse the entire army. Dread seized her heart. A defeat, it would be a catastrophic- the sun was batted out by the beat of great wings.

Her shield wall split, like fish around a shark, and a form leapt down from her mount. The crow-horse let out an eerie cry before flying away, leaving the Warden standing alone in an empty circle of warriors. The Mantle of Woe flapped at her back, the many colours of the foes defeated by the Black Queen of Callow a warning against any who would defy her, while her dreadful staff of dead wood dimmed the sight of any who beheld it – as if stealing the light of the world from your eyes. Catherine



Foundling cracked her neck, and the Lady of Tartessos did not begrudge the three dozen warriors who widened the circle by taking a wary step back.

But Aquiline Osená was Blood, and Blood did not flinch. She stepped into the circle, coming to stand by the Black Queen as no other dared. A coolly amused brown eye found her before flicking away.

"Aquiline," the Warden greeted her. "Clever little plan Kater cooked up against us, isn't it?"

"The Enemy's wiles run deep," the Lady of Tartessos replied, forcing calm.

Catherine Foundling was dangerous as a sword was dangerous: not to be feared, save when turned against you. Aquiline had learned much from her and the Army of Callow, enough to be grateful even knowing it was a boon the Grey Pilgrim had bargained for. But the fear would never entirely go away. The Warden was a graveyard made into a woman, her ghosts so many a second kingdom could be made of them for her to rule.

"Ours too," Catherine Foundling grinned, all teeth and malice. "And the Dead King will need to do better than *this* if he wants to get the drop on me."

The air cooled, the sun's warmth chased away, and Aquiline realized with a start that behind them the Black Queen's shadow had grown. Lengthened, broadened, until it was as a sea. Her warriors fled the spread of it, and not a moment too soon. From the shadow a massive hairy leg began to emerge, then another, as if some gargantuan creature was climbing out of the darkness.

"Ashen Gods," Aquiline croaked. "What is this?"

"An old tyrant," the Warden said, "ridden by a new god."

Roiling darkness in a gargantuan spider's shape, dripping rivulets of Night, rose to cast a shadow over them both.

"Keep your shield wall steady, Aquiline Osená," the smiling madwoman ordered. "I'll handle the rest."

—

The Tusk passed through the shield wall like it wasn't even there, turning orcs and steel alike to crumpled paste without even slowing. Light lashed out at the thick hide in a hook but though it burned through the flesh it scrabbled harmlessly against the stones below. They were just bloody stones, Hakram irritably thought. Nothing for Above to take offence to, so Light was about as useful against it as it would be against a real

rock: not at all, unless a great deal of it was used. Skeletons in bronze and iron poured in the gap the Tusk had torn as it shook, turning around for another pass, but there would be none of that.

"Spears," the Warlord shouted.

They were moving before he even gave the order, **Lead** pulsing with his heartbeat and whispering through their veins. It kept his warriors up, quickened them, strengthened them. And it left them exhausted to the point of collapse when he left. Nothing was without a price. Two dozen spears tore into the Tusk from the sides, scraping against stone as they found purchase and the screaming monster tried to shake them off. It would not. Hakram's axe bit in the back of the beast and he used it to hoist himself up on its back, crawling through filth and rotten leather.

"I broke the gates of Okoro," Hakram Deadhand recited.

He struck. The beast screamed.

"My name echoing three rivers," he said.

And he struck. The beast's knees bent.

"And though I died an age ago," he sang through bared fangs.

And he struck again, through bone and flesh, until his axe touched stone and stone cracked.

*"I live still through your shivers,"* the Warlord snarled, striking one last time with the might of his name in his hand

The stone split under his axe like dead wood, the Tusk's hoarse scream ending abruptly as half its body was carved straight through. Hoarse shouts of approvals, almost howls, and Hakram slid down from the felled beast. He raised his hand in an unspoken order and Dag saw to it, leading champions into the breach to close it and restore the shield wall. It was like holding together a dike, the Warlord thought. Every holed he plugged was followed by another erupting. And still his flank was doing better than Troke's, which had been so close to collapse that General Pallas had led all her kataphraktoi into a charge to stem the disaster.

Razin Tanja and Oghuz had led the foot behind them, as much because Troke needed the reinforcements as to get out of the way of the troops Yannu was shifting to support Hakram's shield wall. Already the right edge of the wall was bolstered with Alava armsmen, but the rest would be here late. So fucking late. Hakram's warriors were fighting like devils, but even with his aspect burning in his belly like a piece of coal he was not sure

it would be enough. At least, though he was not the only one buried neck deep in a nightmare.

In the depths of the pit, Night warred with liquid fire and howling sorceries. Tenebrous, stolen from the ruins of Ater and granted to a lesser god as a mount, was fighting against the Crab as Catherine flew on her mount's back and hammered at the great monster's back with burning black flames. The heat of the fires was so great he could feel it on the wind even from a mile away and bursts of lightning blinded the unwary, but the smaller spider had cracked open the carapace of the larger Crab and it looked like it was trying to devour what its mandibles tore into.

Hakram was not sure what struck more horror in him: the chorus of screams that came from the Crab, or the demented screeches – which somehow echoed of a crow's caws – coming from Tenebrous. Either way, he did not envy the Dominion shield wall left behind to hold the centre. They were close enough that eardrums must be bursting from the noise.

Setting aside the thought, the Warlord returned to the fray. His battle was here, holding back the sea lapping as his wall of shields, and he had no time to spare for anyone else. It was all a whirlwind of blood and screams, steel flashing as the dead ripped out shields and threw themselves at warriors. The crawled under, ripping at flesh, ghouls leapt above shields and tore into formations. The Warlord went where the line broke, where strength sagged, and breach by breach his warband dwindled to nothing. Dead or sent to plug holes, none of the faces around him the same he had begun fighting with.

But his mind was cool, clear. His body was dripping with sweat, muscles aching and his limbs itching where they had been cut, but so long as his mind knew clarity he could make himself move. Another cut, another backhand breaking a skull, another ghouls taken by the neck and *crushed*. There were always more enemies, and it was with utter surprise that Hakram suddenly stood with no one before him. He turned, seeing only awe in the eyes of the warriors behind him, and found he stood alone in a ring of death.

"Report," Hakram Deadhand croaked, his voice raw from songs he did not remember singing.

"The Dominion has come, Warlord," a woman with the colours of the Graven Bones on her mangled shield said. "We stand."

The Warlord looked around. How many had died? *Too many*, he thought. Thousands on his flank alone. But wherever his gaze went he saw the dead losing ground, fresh Levantine armymen tearing into them.

"Let Levant handle the rest," he said. "Pull back in good order."

The Clans had done enough bleeding for the day. From the corner of his eye he noted that the shield wall left to hold the edge of the pit had pulled back and sneered. They had not even held back that paltry amount of dead, while his own faced the sea and won?

"What happened in the centre?" he asked.

"Aquiline Osená was hit by an arrow," the same woman told him. "They say she had to be pulled back and may die."

Hakram grimaced. Well, she wouldn't be the only one today.

—

Merciless Gods but the Wolfhound could take a beating.

The other Revenant had died in moments, fending off Sidonia's assault but falling to a single blow of the Stained Sister. Barehanded, she crumpled the helmet and the head behind it. Pinon did not like the taste of her in the air, Ishaq had noticed, which meant it was likely true the Choir of Endurance had taken an interest. Regardless, that aspect of the Sisters' that lent her such brute strength was proving well worth her attitude. If only the Scourge had proved as easy a prey as the other.

A simple iron shield should not have been able to take a blow from the Barrow Sword's blade without a scar, but not a single one of them had yet to leave a mark on anything the Wolfhound wore. Ishaq had been told that the Scourge had the finest defence of all in the Dead King's service, but he had not expected to be dealing with the Keter's answer to the fucking Mirror Knight. At least, unlike Christophe de Pavanie, the Wolfhound did not strike as hard as he defended. That would have made this fight impossible instead of merely unlikely.

And Ishaq always trusted his luck to get him through unlikely, for good or ill.

"**Pierce,**" the Vagrant Spear snarled, lunging forward.

Slower than before, though. It was her third time using the aspect, and like the last two it skidded across the side of the iron shield. Ishaq had stepped to the side as Sidonia struck and he moved to flank the Wolfhound, but the Scourge calmly took a step back and kept his sword high. Ready for a parry. The both of them continued circling each other as Sidonia panted loudly, the Stained Sister coming up to take her place. The old woman in the stained priestess garb moved like the wind and leap, but not so quick that her attempt to smash down the shield with both hands was not taken on instead. Ishaq risked a strike, a quick lunge near the neck — he was getting frustrated at never having pierced deep enough for Pinon to drink of the soul — but the parry was waiting.

The surprise came when he saw the Harrowed Witch sent her brother's ghost trailing behind the Sister and the specter threw himself at the Wolfhound's legs.

"Go," the Barrow Sword hissed. "Everyone."

The Grave Binder was looking unsteady on his feet, which meant they were running out of time to finish this. From the corner of his eye Ishaq saw movement, an arrow, but the Archer once more shot it out of the air before it could get anywhere close. Three more shots followed in quick succession, the Hawk being forced on the run by her opponent for what had to be the fifth time since the fight had begun. Ishaq put it out of his mind, trusting the Archer to cover him, and struck at the Wolfhound's back. The iron armour held but the blow broke the Scourge's poise, allowing Sidonia to slap away his shield and the Sister to land a hard blow on his helmet. It bent, ever so slightly, but the Wolfhound himself was slammed down into the dust.

The Barrow Sword, eyes wild, stabbed through the eye and to his triumph felt *flesh*.

"**Drink,**" he snarled.

Pinon was every thirsty, but with his aspect behind her pull it was more than soft pulls taken from the soul. The Revenant imprisoned soul ebbed, pulled into his sword, but Ishaq's eyes widened in utter surprise when he felt the slightest ripple. An *aspect*. A moment later he was flying, blown off his feet, and Sidonia had a cut across her face that bled red trails down her face paint. He landed on his back, letting out a pained gasp. Pinon did not leave his hand. She never did, unless he made the decision let her go.

Ishaq rose to his feet in time to see the Stained Sister take a shield smash in the face, breaking her nose. For all her strength, she was not a trained warrior. Not like he and Sidonia were. The Vagrant Spear quickly made the Mark of Mercy and struck, bare feet padding across the dust as she used her spear to vault herself above the Wolfhound and strike at his neck from the back. But the shield was in the way, once more, as the Scourge calmly pivoted.

"Ishaq," the Grave Binder croaked out. "Not long now. *Hurry.*"

It was slipping out of his fingers, the Barrow Sword realized. It was all so very close, and he was going to end up with nothing because his aspects were a poor match for the Scourge's. Because too many of his band had been brought for the talent that would get them out or in the fight instead of help *during*. The rage, the indignation, burned in his belly like acid.

"No," he hissed, even as Sidonia burned another aspect to move quickly enough to avoid being skewered.

He took a step forward, then two.

"No," Ishaq repeated, even as the halo of Light forming around the Sainted Sister was snuffed out by mere closeness to the iron armour.

Close now, close enough the Wolfhound was keeping him in sight.

"No," the Barrow Sword bit out, as Aspasia's brother was carved through and dispersed.

The spectre would reform, but not for some time. It did not matter, because now Ishaq was on his enemy and there would be no quarter. He took the shield bash on the face head on, his helm of bronze ringing, and though his nose broke he grinned through the blood and caught the Wolfhound's shield arm. The Scourge began pulling away, its strength implacable, but Ishaq smashed his bloody head into the Revenant's helm and broke the effort. He smashed Pinon's pommel into the faceplate of the helm, rocking back his foe, and in the heartbeat that followed felt a blade slide into his guts.

"No," the Barrow Sword spat into the Scourge's face, spit red, and slammed his blade through the eyehole again.

**Drink**, he thought again, with all his greed and rage. The aspect bit deep, bit hard, and for a glorious instant the soul came loose. Only then there was that fucking ripple, and it was all going to – Ishaq felt a faint touch on his shoulder, light as feather. He could not look, could not move in this frozen moment, but if he turned he somehow knew he would see a crow.

The offer went unsaid, but it might as well have been screamed.

"I have sold more of me for lesser prizes," Ishaq laughed, and saw in his mind's eye a pair cold smiles under silver eyes. "Take all you want."

Night flooded through his veins, blazing ice, and he tossed it blindly at the Scourge's soul. The heartbeat passed, the ripple finished, and the Barrow Sword was once more thrown off his feet. He landed roughly, bleeding and pained and well on his way to death, but he was laughing. Because the Wolfhound took a staggering step, then another, and then on the third that *fucking helmet blew up in a burst of black flames*. Still laughing wildly, Ishaq pulled himself up.

"How does it go again?" he said, wiping tears. "Ah, yes."

The Barrow Sword raised his blade to the sky in a salute.

"Chno Sve Noc, my darlings," Ishaq grinned though his bloodied beard.

Behind them, in the distance, one colossal monster finished ripping apart another. A great Crab reputed in a storm of flame that blotted out the sky, glassing the ground, while a gargantuan spider wreathed in Night let out victorious screeches.

"Best we get out of the army before the Warden starts stepping on it," the Barrow Sword noted, smiling back in the face of the wary looks from the heroines. "Aspasie?"

"Oh Gods I would have left like an hour ago," the Harrow Witch replied, and her sorcery snapped into place.

The same trick that had let her survive the dead, Ishaq thought with satisfaction, should be enough to get the five of them out of the army unseen before he finished bleeding out. It would be a poor end to his first deed in the Rolls, the Barrow Sword mused, to die.

Even if he got back up afterwards.

—

Lady Itima Ifriqui blinked at the messenger.

"You're certain?" she carefully asked.

"Hundreds saw it, my lady," the man replied. "It was too deep a wound for it to be cauterized by a Lantern, she had to pull back to get a healer."

Itima's mind raced. Was this Yannu's doing? Cleaning up the other threat now that the battle was turning into a victory? It was not her that had given the order. It was Razin she had in her sights, having laid a trail to have a jealous Tartessos captain who wanted Aquiline's hand blamed for it, but it should not yet have been carried out. Perhaps it was the Enemy's work and not that of the Lord of Alava, she decided. The two of them slain in a single battle would be too obvious, certain to have the Warden taking a closer look at the matter. The Gods were having a laugh at their expense, it seemed.

"Will she live?" the Lady of Vaccei bluntly asked.

The messenger hesitated, coming closer, and Itima frowned as she leant in. There were only armsmen around her, trusted Ifriqui men, but it paid to be careful. Still, it felt like theatre to — the knife moved in a blur but Itima was of the Brigand's Blood. She caught the wrist before it did more than scrape her cheek and she had a dagger sliding in the man's belly before a heartbeat had passed, twisting to make the assassin gasp in pain.

"You fool," she hissed. "You think you're the first to try? I'll keep you alive for *days* before you get the mercy of death."

"Honour," the man gasped, "to the Blood."

Her stomach tightened and she dropped the assassin, taking a step back and touching her cheek. A single cut. *Poison*.

"Healer," Lady Itima barked at her armsmen. "Get me a healer *now*."

Thirty men and women stood around her, the tabards over their coats of mail in the colours of the Vengeful Brigand's Blood. Loyal warriors, the finest in the service of the Ifriqui.

Not one of them moved.

Itima Ifriqui beheld the circle of steel around her which she had thought a shield a heartbeat ago but now recognized as a cage. She did not ask who, because there was only one man they would have betrayed her to: another Ifriqui. A spasm shuddered across her body, bringing her to her knees. A quick poison, Itima dimly thought. And almost painless.

Within thirty heartbeats she was dead.

—

The messenger whispered into Moro's ear and Razin watched as the man's scarred face convulsed with grief.

"Sad news?" the Lord of Malaga asked.

"It appears that my mother's heart gave, Lord Razin," Moro Ifriqui sadly said. "They think it was the hours in the heat wearing armour. Her health has been getting worse for years, but she insisted on taking the field today."

The way he said it, it almost sounded true. The woman who had murdered three of Aquiline's brothers was dead, the Lord of Malaga thought. A feud would be buried with her.

"She will have passed seeing us victorious, at least," Razin gently said. "Take comfort in that."

"There is no comfort to take in any of this, I think," Moro said, tone too raw to be a lie.

It was not, Razin reminded himself, about good and bad.

"Then why?" he asked.

*Why come to me, why take my deal, why refuse to return to the tower and close the door behind you.*



"I told my brother," Moro Ifriqui softly said, "that I get him home to his family."

Razin met the other man's eyes.

"We all want to go home, Razin Tanja," the man who was to be Lord of Vaccei said. "And not to fight another fucking war. So I'll do whatever's needed to get us there."

"Eyes like poison, heart like stone," Razin softly quoted.

Moro finished the verse from the Anthem of Smoke, changing only a word.

"By my hand a thousand graves sown," the Ifriqui murmured.

Silence held between them. Soon enough, a man that Itima Ifriqui had paid to kill Razin would try to do so. Rima Marave would silence him before he could speak. And when the coin was followed, it would be revealed that Careful Yannu had been the one to pay the assassin, that he had planned to kill an ally in the midst of a battle against the Dead King himself. But Razin would keep the secret, keep the Lord of Alava from being called a traitor by all of Calernia and the Valiant Champion's Blood from being dishonoured beyond repair.

He would do this so long as, when they all returned to Levant, Yannu Marave did not take up arms.

Razin Tanja watched the distant line of horizon, sitting the saddle, and wondered about the nature of change.

## Chapter 55: Hail

*"Nineteen: always help the treacherous lieutenant to kill your nemesis when asked. Even if it's a plot they'll likely stick the knife if it looks like you're winning."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Tenebrous smashed the last of the dead with unsettling glee, stomping about the undead army until there was no group larger than a dozen moving from the battlefield.

The dead did not rout, but the Dead King had decided to cut his losses and save some of the skeletons for battles to come and so the last two or three thousand scattered in every direction. The sight of it had the army cheering, the signs of victory become unarguable, but for all that that burst of enthusiasm there would be no pursuit. There was no cavalry left in any fit state to run down the enemy, and though Komena wanted to pursue the retreating

bands I advised against it. There was no telling what manner of nastiness the Dead King might have waiting for her out there.

So Tenebrous returned to my shadow and the Battle of the Ruins, as General Pallas had suggested it be named, came to an end. It was a victory, but a costly one. From the first charge to the lines of the dead collapsing completely the battle had lasted barely three hours yet it was still one of the bloodier ones I'd fought over the last year.

Part of that was the nature of the armies involved. Orcs and Levantines tended to have inferior equipment to the Army of Callow, with its standard issue armour and weapons. Levantines were armed according to the wealth of the captain who led them in battle, an irregular arrangement, and the Clans were even worse. Equipment and training both varied wildly from clan to clan, though the larger ones all fielded a core of well-armed veterans as their main fighting force. On both sides, though, the average soldier didn't usually have a full suit of mail and plate was fairly rare. In a bloody, graceless brawl like the one fought today that meant casualties had begun to rack up as time passed.

The other side of the coin was Keter's forces, who in this case had boasted equipment parity at best but had the one advantage that undead could never lose: they weren't alive. Sure, the averages Bones was barely better than a Proceran levy in a fight but unlike that levy it would not tire or rout. It made Keteran armies a fucking pain to actually break, because they wouldn't run if they began to lose and they had an advantage the longer the battle continued. However unimpressive a skeleton wielding a bronze sword might be, when it was facing soldiers too tired to put up their shields in time it was going to start landing blows.

The Clans had been taught that hard lesson today. Holding the flanks against onslaughts all afternoon until Lord Yannu was able to swing around his forces to reinforce had been a bloody business and only gotten bloodier as the hours passed. Though Hakram had not yet put together a system to count casualties like the Army of Callow's, the rough estimate he'd gotten was that out of the twenty-three thousand warriors that'd sallied out only about fourteen thousand would be coming back. Almost ten thousand dead, a rough day for the orcs. The Levantines had walked away much more lightly wounded, down about four thousand warriors out of their twenty-seven. The worse off were still General Pallas' kataphraktoi, who'd had gotten themselves mauled keeping the right flank from collapsing. They'd almost half of their three thousand in furious charges,

It would be hours yet before we knew the real count of the butcher's bill, but there was no time to spend grieving. We needed to get moving, lest we be caught out in the plains come dark. First came the grim labour of taking care of the dead,

warriors stripping their fallen comrades of arms and armour – we could not afford to waste any – before dragging them to make great piles. Mages and priests torched those until there was nothing left for the Dead King to use, mounds of bodies crackling bright as the afternoon crawled forward. We then left the field with what some might have called unseemly haste, but it would have been a mistake to linger.

There were still other armies out there, and the last thing we needed was to get stuck fighting them in the dark.

While I could have left the returning army in the dust, flying far ahead on Zombie's back, I led her into a landing instead and rode to speak with the victors of the day. Most cheerful of them all was the Barrow Sword, who had slain the Wolfhound and so fulfilled his end of the bargain with the Blood. He had earned a place in the Rolls. He'd also picked up another trick along the way.

"Night, huh," I mused, cocking my head to the side.

"So you *can* tell at a glance," Ishaq replied, stroking a beard matted with blood and dirt. "Useful."

"I'm still First Under the Night," I simply said.

That the Barrow Sword had taken the offer did not surprise me in the least, as Ishaq was brutally pragmatic even by Levantine standards, but that Sve Noc had extended it in the first place did. It had only been a matter of time before they began approaching villains, of course, but beginning with the representative for Below under the Truce and Terms was a bold statement. Maybe even more than that, I thought. The most powerful heroes all tended to have use of the Light, so granting Night to the most visible of the villains on Calernia – Neshamah and myself, anyway – was as good as slapping down a gauntlet. There was another merchant of miracles at the market, and this one a lot less squeamish than the Choirs.

If we were not at war and Calernia on the brink of annihilation, I suspected quite a few heroes would have answered that challenge sword in hand.

"I count myself in the finest company, then," the Barrow Sword grinned.

I snorted. He was in a gloatingly fine mood and I couldn't get myself to smack his fingers for it. Taking care of the Wolfhound had been solid work on his part: by itself the Revenant wasn't much trouble for our finer Named, but it was never by itself. It was always a meatshield for another altogether more dangerous Scourge, turning difficult opponents into outright lethal ones. It would have been even better if he'd gotten the Mantle, pain

that she was for me to deal with, but I wouldn't look a dead Scourge in the mouth. I'd praised him enough during the report, though, so instead of reiterating and swelling his head I changed the subject.

"I hear there was a scuffle with the Blood during the battle," I idly said.

Curious dark eyes studied me.

"If Itima Ifriqui truly died of old age," the Barrow Sword said, "I will shave my beard and enter a monastery."

Yeah, hadn't bought that either. Someone had killed the old viper, though it was hard to tell who. None of the other Blood were kicking up a fuss though, not even her sons, so I was inclined to let sleeping dogs lie for now. It might be worth squeezing some answers out my ducklings later, but I wasn't inclined to get too involved if the boat wasn't rocking. Moro Ifriqui, though one-armed since the Graveyard, was popular with the Vaccei captains and on much better terms with the rest of the Blood. As far as I was concerned, Levant had traded up when he got put in charge – informally for now, until his kin Levant pushed through the same procedural trick that'd allowed Razin to become Lord of Malaga without returning there to be acclaimed.

"Not too much to be gained from digging," I mused. "The army's holding up well, which is the important part at the moment."

Ishaq was no fool, so he nodded in acknowledgement of my unspoken warning. He could have a look if he was curious, I'd tacitly told him, but only so far as it didn't endanger the readiness of the Dominion armies.

"I imagine my duties will be keeping me busy," the Barrow Sword replied.

"Good man," I pleasantly smiled.

I stayed long enough to get the tale of the fight told to me by the entire band of five, expanding on the simple report, and handed congratulations where they were deserved. Ishaq, cleverly enough, was unstinting in his praise of the Vagrant Spear and the Harrowed Witch. By doing so he was sharing the glory with a heroine in good odour with the Blood and by far the least threatening of the villains under the Terms, both strikes useful to him in the long term. He was shaping up nicely as my successor for representative, I decided. He'd been the right pick, for all that Indrani had needed to get her hands dirty to put him in place.

Speaking of Indrani, I found she was not in so fine a mood as the Barrow Sword.

"Couldn't land an arrow on the bastard," she told me, speaking of the Hawk. "It's unpleasantly good at running."

"You kept anyone important from getting shot," I reassured her. "Which was what I asked you, 'Drani, not a scalp."

"Aquiline got shot," she pointed out.

I rolled my eye.

"Not by the Hawk," I said. "That girl needs to start using a fucking shield or get better at ducking. If she gets killed by a skeleton, I may not be able to stop from laughing at her wake."

Which my finely-honed diplomatic instincts led me to suspect at least *some* Levantines might take offence to.

"You're all heart, Cat," Archer drily replied.

I shrugged. Aquiline would survive, the arrow had missed her lungs and they'd gotten her to a healer in time. The light armour preferred by the Slayer's Blood had its uses, I wouldn't argue otherwise after witnessing firsthand the skill of Levantine skirmishers during my Wasteland campaign, but it was ill-suited to the kind of battles the Dead King gave. She should order some good plate and get it over with before she picked up enough scars it'd ruin her paints. Gods knew today's wound was certain to leave one, mage healing or not. I left Indrani to her mood, which at least seemed to be inspiring her to scheme ways to handle the Hawk when they next met.

Hakram was easy enough to find, and though his chiefs were in a festive mood – a victory had been won today and everyone knew the Clans had done the heavy lifting – I knew that look on his face. It was the kind of calm deliberation he put on when he was trying not to openly disgruntled. I'd seen him put on shades of it more than once after Vivienne beat him at shatranj, though the shade of it today was rather more serious than that. I traded congratulations with a few chiefs, meeting Juniper's father for the first time in the process. Oghuz the Lamé was an impressive sort, all the more for being chief of a clan as powerful as the Red Shields when he needed a cane to walk.

Most orcs saw cripples as barely better than children, so he must still be a deft hand at duelling despite his age.

"I think she has your cheekbones," I told him.

"She does, the poor child," Oghuz mourned on behalf of his daughter. "At least she mostly inherited Istrid's looks aside from that."

"They make you look friendlier," I said, patting his shoulder. "Hakram's might as well be a razor blade."

The older orc looked rather charmed at that, to my surprise. I chatted with him longest of the chiefs, but he still left with the others when their Warlord implied he needed to speak with me privately. Then outright stated it, when the slower sorts failed to catch on. Eventually it was only the two of us, Hakram's face slumping into exhaustion as he met my gaze.

"Come to see how I'm holding up, I take it," the Warlord said.

The tone was a little pointed but was tired enough to fall short of being accusing.

"Something like that," I acknowledged.

I wouldn't deny that I had come as the Warden as much as I had come as a friend. Rare were the situations these days where I could afford to be only one of the two. He didn't look pleased by the reply, but I suspected he'd appreciated I had not tried to pretty it up.

"I will not falter, Catherine," Hakram said. "But will you begrudge me that I am bitter it was my people who bore the weight of the slaughter today?"

"It's why you agreed to take the flanks," I evenly replied. "Levant's twenty-seven thousand are all that's left of their armies. You have numbers they do not."

He'd brought almost thrice their number in warriors, and that hadn't even been the entire army he'd marched south to Ater. Mind you, orcs fielded a lot more warriors than most other nations since most of a clan except the young and the elderly would take up arms when there was plunder to be had. Considering how many women there were in orc warbands and their age – between twenty to forty – if the force brought to Keter was wiped out the consequences for the Steppes would be disastrous. Much worse than if the Dominion lost the entire army they'd sent to the Grand Alliance

"More died than was necessary," the Warlord growled. "We fell for the trap. I did not gainsay Yannu then and that is my guilt, but I will not forget we were left to stand alone for most of the battle."

"That's fair," I honestly replied. "I imagine General Pallas feels much the same. The course of the fight ended up going badly for both of you, so you have good reason to resent him."

So long as they didn't end up blaming Careful Yannu for malice that did not exist instead of a tactical mistake, I had no issue

with some resentment existing. The Lord of Alava was a skilled general, but in this instance he'd not particularly impressed. To be honest, if it had been the Army of Callow dying on the flanks I'd likely be a great deal less gracious about this than Hakram was being.

"Pallas bled her men for us," Hakram conceded. "It was worth gratitude."

"She bled her men because if Troke's flank collapsed we were going to lose the battle," I said. "Pallas isn't exactly a bleeding heart."

She was, however, a talented tactician. She'd even correctly identified that with the Warlord holding the other flank together, it was Troke's that was in dire need of aid.

"Her reasons matter less than her actions," Hakram replied.

I shrugged. I wasn't going to argue the point if he wanted to toss thanks General Pallas' way, honestly. She was back under Helike and Empress Basilia these days, but I hadn't forgotten that Pallas and her soldiers had fought up north with the Grand Alliance years before anyone else from the League gave us the time of the day. Instead of arguing, I hummed and took a look at his Name to confirm the subtle difference I'd felt in him from the start.

"I see you picked up an aspect while you were at it," I said.

There he looked pleased.

"The traces of it were there, but it came together during the battle," Hakram said. "You can discern the word?"

"My sight's not that precise," I admitted. "Not right now, at least. I tend to see more deeply around pivots, when fate is thicker. But I can tell what it's about, more or less."

Active authority, in a local and direct sense. Not surprising for a career officer and my former right hand to pick up, especially after he'd stepped into large boots of his own by becoming the Warlord.

"**Lead**," Hakram said, not hesitating a moment.

I felt something in me unclench at the offered trust. For Named, aspects were cards best kept up your sleeves: keeping them hidden until they could be used to devastating effect was often the difference between winning or losing a fight.

"Try to use it," I suggested. "Let's see if I can help you feel out the limits."

It would have been a more politic use of my time to ride with the Blood instead for the rest of the way back, but part of me refused to think of that as the better use. We marched together the rest of way back, others flitting in and out but the two of us staying side by side until the camp was in sight.

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“*Fuck me,*” I said. “What the Hells happened to the floating siege towers?”

Vivienne looked grim. Given the wreckage I was looking at, she had good reason to. Keter was an island of stone surrounded by a deep chasm that was broken by only four bridges, which were the natural path to take when trying to take the city. Because we weren’t raging idiots, we expected that the Dead King would use them to funnel our armies into narrow killing zones for as long as possible and then collapse them the moment there was a risk of us actually taking one of the gates. We’d prepared for that eventuality — it was not happenstance that none of the three most powerful mages in the Grand Alliance had left the camp — but it’d always been understood that the gates were unlikely to fall to us.

That was why Praes had turned floating structures into great siege towers, so that we might broaden our assault.

“Two were sunk,” the Princess replied.

I grimaced, but to be blunt I was not surprised.

“There’s a reason we didn’t fill them with troops from the start,” I said.

Only enough to secure a beachhead on the walls, no more. Otherwise we risked pissing away a few thousand soldiers to exactly no gain whatsoever.

“Two touched the walls,” Vivienne continued. “Masego kept most of Keter’s counter-magic off them for long enough.”

“That’s impressive,” I said, “but since I’m not looking at a wall flying our banners, I’m going to assume that *something* went horribly wrong.”

“We still have one tower,” she sighed, brushing back a strand of brown hair.

“I hope to Below you don’t mean that one, Vivi,” I replied, pointing forward.

The outer rampart of Keter had been, in a manner of speaking, breached. Someone had seen fit to smash the floating siege tower into said wall, hard enough that it had gotten embed into said



wall. It looked, I thought, a little like a knife dropped into a bloc of butter and jutting out. Except for the part where it was all stone on both sides and several tons of it were involved. The 'bottom' of the tower was extending far enough out of the wall that it really should have snapped off or dragged the whole thing into the chasm by now, which meant the enchantments keeping the structure aloft still partially worked. It was an oddly disturbing sight.

Princess sighed again.

"The assault went well at first," she told me. "We pushed across two of the four bridges, and though Keter spared neither arrows nor sorcery we reached the gates. The siege towers were torched before they could cross, but the ladders and the rams got through."

"So when we started knocking at the gates, Keter dropped the bridges," I predicted.

She nodded.

"We sent heroes under the bridges first, to try to prevent that, but Pickler believes that there is no outside mechanism. The bridges were built from the start with foundations under the city of Keter that could be brought down," Vivienne said. "It was old work, regardless, and played out differently on the two bridges."

I could see one of the two from where we stood, the fortified camp surrounding Keter as a ring of flame from all the torches and bonfires lit in the night. The arch of stone was missing its forward half, leaving the gate of Keter to stand over a sheer cliff.

"The Witch should have been able to handle that," I said, nodding there.

"She did," Princess replied. "She held the stones aloft long enough for our forces to retreat through them. And on the other side Sahelian negated the Enemy's work."

I cocked a curious eyebrow.

"Only a section in the middle collapsed," Vivienne said, "splitting the army in two and stranding the vanguard. She filled the gap with ice."

I sniffed in disdain. Someone was cribbing from my tactics. I'd started that whole ice thing in Dormer, long before anyone else got famous for it.

"So we kept up one of the bridge assaults and landed two towers," I mused. "Still a solid enough offensive. I take it that's when it started going wrong?"

"The Tumult came out to duel Hierophant to keep him from protecting the towers," she replied. "And Keter counter-attacked with wyrms."

I blinked. Those were great snake-constructs that'd only rarely seen use out of Twilight's Pass, being the Dead King's equivalent of our Praesi floating siege towers. The massive snakes were armoured and had ladders inside, which the dead could climb after the wyrms hooked themselves to the edge of the wall with steel and bone. What use could they have-

"He crammed his siege towers into our siege towers, like a snake forced into the maw of a larger one," I breathed out, putting it together.

It was both utterly wasteful of manpower, I thought, and brilliant in a twisted way.

"It kept us from landing a beachhead on the walls," Vivienne said, "and once he had us pinned, the Seelie came out."

Masego insisted that what that Scourge did was 'fascination', a form of enchantment, but it was pretty much mind control whatever he wanted to call it. So the Dead King had kept us contained to small tunnels with no real room to manoeuvre than then unleashed the fucking mind control fairy on the people inside. Yeah, I can see that turning nasty. Just for a bit, though. After that, it'd be sure to summon...

"The Blade of Mercy and Daring Pyromancer ran into her," Vivienne continued. "The Seelie got the Pyromancer, but the Blade cut the spell out of him and they set fire to the wyrm. It made her retreat, but ended up being something of a tactical mistake."

Setting fire to tightly enclosed spaces full of people who couldn't easily get out tended to be that.

"How bad?" I grimaced.

"Almost two thousand dead, more from the stampede and the smoke than the fire," Vivienne said, "and the dead got to the heart of the tower in the chaos."

"So that's how it got crashed," I frowned.

"No," Princess shook her head. "They tried to make them crash into *each other*."

Her description of what came after that was nightmarish. The Praesi mages controlling the other tower had seen the threat

coming and tried to withdraw, but the wyrm inside had fought the movement. The soldiers inside panicked as the dead kept pouring in, meanwhile the other tower rose higher could it could be smashed down like a child banging rock down at another. Fortunately, the Black Knight had led a band through daring strike into the grounded tower to remove the wyrm using some acidic creation of the Concocter's that would dissolve it from the inside. It would have still failed, if Hanno and his own band had not stepped in to settle the other tower.

"How did they even get into it?" I frowned. "It should have been fully in flight by then."

"The Mirror Knight," Vivienne said.

"Sure, throwing him is the traditional opening gambit," I acknowledged. "But after he landed – wait, are *serious*?"

She nodded, lips twitching.

"They bound themselves to the Mirror Knight and had him thrown by a trebuchet, using him to pierce through the siege tower's walls," Princess said.

I paused.

"I know it's in poor taste to complain when they're on our side," I said, "but sometimes I do get a little irritated at how they keep getting away with this shit."

After that they'd fought their way through the dead and taken back control of the tower, holding it up long enough that the other one was able to get away. The turnaround was not to last, though, since the Tumult slipped past Masego and crippled the enchantments keeping the tower up. It began to crash.

"How'd they get out?" I asked, morbidly curious.

"For a very brief moment the falling tower and the one withdrawing were aligned, with only a gap of a dozen feet between where one ended and the other began," Vivienne said. "So they..."

"They jumped," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "They jumped out the falling tower into the other one, like assholes."

Vivienne's blue-grey eyes betrayed some amusement at my expense.

"He's not even really Named anymore, he's transitioning," I complained.

"I'll be sure to bring the matter up at the next war council," Princess replied, serenely smiling.

My lips twitched, and the two of us stood there in silence for a while. Staring at the dark silhouette of Keter in the distance. The humour slowly melted away.

"How many?" I asked.

"At least sixteen thousand dead," Vivienne softly replied. "And I hear your battle was closer than anticipated."

"Fourteen thousand dead or thereabouts," I said. "The enemy got clever with a sand trap and mauled our flanks. The Clans soaked up the worst of it."

At least thirty thousand dead between the battle and the storm, huh. I stood there and let myself grasp that, the sheer number of soldiers we'd gotten killed in a day. I had fought entire campaigns where I had lost fewer men than died today. And it was only going to get worse. None of us had truly expected this assault on the walls to work, deep down. It was a first probe, to see how heavily defended the Crown of the Dead was. Almost two hundred and fifty thousand soldiers had come here to break the end times before they could break us. Nine more attacks like this and we'd run out of men.

We hadn't even managed to set foot inside the fucking city.

"It'll look better tomorrow," Vivienne finally said.

"No it won't," I murmured.

A moment.

"No it won't," my friend admitted.

So we stood there in silence, sharing company, until fear had dulled enough we could crawl into our beds to sleep.

## Chapter 56: Brink

*"Note: while curiosity did kill the cat, the effect only ensued when it was so strongly imprinted in the mind as to overwrite motor functions. Human experiments reproduced the results, leaving what would set cats apart unclear."*

*– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II*

The Grand Alliance taken a swing in the face, but we'd get over it. That was the way these things went, really. You rolled with the black eye, threw sand in the other guy's face come next round and stabbed them good in the belly while they were blinded. I told Vivienne as much when we discussed what should follow our 'victories' over breakfast. Her milkmaid braid was undone,

falling down her back, and she started blearily at me over porridge she insisted on touching up with honey for some godforsaken reason.

"Have you considered," Princess said, "that the unreasonable number of brawls you've been in might be making your metaphors baffling to anyone remotely normal?"

Indrani, seated between us, finished scarfing down her sausage and licked her fingers before shaking her head at Vivienne.

"Nah, her stuff is always easy to get," Archer said. "You're off on that one."

My successor cocked an eyebrow at me as I winced. Ah, 'Drani. Even when trying to help, she ended up verbally socking me in the stomach like usual. It was a fair point that if Archer and I were on the same wavelength, there might be a little too much brawl in my metaphors.

"No, Vivienne is entirely correct," Hierophant absent-mindedly said. "When Catherine gets started it sometimes turns into rather mystifying jargon."

I grinned, cocking an eyebrow at Princess, whose turn it was to wince. Yeah, *Masego* was agreeing with her. I wasn't the only one with a would-be helper tying stones around my feet. Hierophant's notion of commonly understandable conversation was about three years if magical study removed from any halfway reasonable expectation. *Draw*, Vivienne mouthed at me, and I inclined my head. I could have tried for the win, but if Indrani caught on to what I was doing she was most definitely enough of a wench to go out of her way to sink my chances.

"Look, my perfectly serviceable metaphors aside the situation's not that bad," I said, allowing myself more frankness than I would in a war council. "The hourglass is emptying when it comes to supply, sure, but none of us actually expected our first shot at the walls to win us Keter."

"I did expect us to land on the walls, however," *Masego* noted. "Which we did not."

I sighed, not arguing the point because he wasn't wrong. Sixteen thousand dead without a single foot being set atop the walls of Keter was not great for morale. The reports from the phalanges and the Jacks I'd read over while drinking my tea had been pretty clear about that: even the Army of Callow's spirit had been bruised by yesterday's battles. It was unsurprisingly worst of all the Grand Alliance in the Proceran forces, which still sported a number of levies. The conscripts had been hardened by the years of fighting, but they'd never be as steady as career soldiers.

"Like I said, we took a swing in the face," I told him. "But we have a better idea of Keter's defences now and the next assault we'll mount *will* punch through the defences."

While the Confederation of Praes did not have a Warlock it did have an informal leading mage, Lady Nahiza Serrif. She'd been set to the task of overseeing the Praesi mages during the battle, backing up Masego's defensive spellcasting to shut down Keteran ritual, but she'd had another duty and she'd discharged it successfully: we now had an estimate of what Legion doctrine called the 'spellfire volume' of the Dead King's forces. As laid out by now-general Grem One-Eye's *Considerations*, spellfire volume was the total amount of sorcery than an opposing force was capable of mustering at once.

It didn't necessarily translate into superior strength in practice, since for example a smaller cadre of casters capable of High Arcana might well overpower a significantly larger group of less-trained mages that could technically deploy more sorcery. What it did give us, though, was an estimate of the enemy's maximum strike capacity and how much of our own mages we should keep in reserve to defend. In this case, the answer was looking to be a little over two thirds of our casters. That was still a lot of strength loose for us to deploy, which meant a lot of the plans we'd been keeping back were now looking to be viable.

Committing the greater Praesi fortresses, for one, but also Chancellor Alaya's battlefield applications of Still Water. And since we could deploy these with an expectation that we wouldn't just be throwing away irreplaceable assets, it meant we could start using our trump cards to make openings for them. No, yesterday had been a black eye but it'd not been a total loss.

"And when's that going to be?" Indrani asked, curious. "We're going to be with the besieging force this time, yeah?"

"We are," I confirmed. "We'll have to discuss in council who takes their turn sallying out to keep our back clean, but I'm pretty sure it's going to be the League with some Proceran reinforcements."

Even after the Principate had spent years being ravaged, it still had by far the largest cavalry contingent of all the nations of the Grand Alliance. After the casualties her cataphracts had taken at the Battle of the Ruins to keep Chief Troke's flank from collapsing, Basilia was sure to want to use someone else's cavalry on the field.

"Nice," Archer said. "Been talking with Alexis about a trick we could use on a Scourge, it'd be interesting to try out. Doesn't tell me when we're taking our crack at it, though."

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "Not for a few days at least. We need to see to our wounded and let the soldiers rest for a bit."

Much as I disliked waiting, given the dire state of our supplies, you couldn't repeatedly send armies into the meat grinders and expect them not to break. We'd prepare for the assault and get it going as soon as morale had solidified.

"Good," Masego said. "I have begun studying the damage the fallen tower made to Keter's wards when it fell through the wall, but it is a difficult matter and enemy interference complicates it further. Time will help."

"Doesn't it always?" I easily replied.

It was the most precious resource, when making war, and always the scarcest. I left that breakfast in a better mood, some of the gloom for last night shed now that I some sleep in my body and a semblance of a path forward. I spent two days conferring with Named and generals, laying out the skeleton of the assault to come, and Hierophant even tossed some good news our way. The fallen tower, while it might not have destroyed the wards that made it unfeasible to reduce the walls of Keter by sorcery, had weakened several sections of them. That knowledge allowed me to add some flesh to the bones of the plan, Juniper further refining it.

And then we had trouble.

—

It had now been five days since the Battle of the Ruins, and it'd gotten bad enough that we'd had to call a war council over it. It drew raised eyebrows when I brought General Abigail instead of Juniper as my second, but everyone there had concerns great enough it didn't even end up warranting a spoken question.

"If we were not stranded," First Princess Rozala Malanza frankly said, "half my army would have deserted by now."

I winced. The Jacks had told me it was bad, but not quite *that* bad.

"I've had conversations with the Stygians and the Penthesians that bordered on threats to walk," Empress Basilia admitted. "And if they *do* walk, others will follow."

"It's not the nobles we have to worry about, it's the rank and file," I flatly stated. "We can hang a few aristocrats and the rest will fall in line, but we can't hang an army into being fighting fit."

"Threat of death will do little," Chancellor Alaya agreed, "when most of the Grand Alliance's soldiery is now convinced it is going to die anyway."

Which they were, and Gods forgive me but I couldn't even blame them. Our supply situation had been known for some time by select officers – inevitable, since we were already rationing and there were now about two weeks of food left – but we'd kept a lid on the real sucker punch: the dwarves weren't going to be supplying us with anything. The deal with the Herald of the Deeps had fallen through and his replacement, Lady Sybella, was perfectly willing to leave us to die until we bent to the even steeper terms she'd offered. Soldiers weren't always the most learned of people, but most of them could do simple mathematics.

There were two weeks of food left, none more around or coming, and it had taken more than two weeks to get to Keter through the Twilight Ways. Which were, anyhow, shattered.

The realization that even if by some miracle Keter was taken quickly enough everyone the Grand Alliance had brought north was likely to starve to death in the aftermath had been a knockout blow in the wake of the black eye caused by our first failed offensive. Morale had cratered, and even in the Army of Callow some soldiers had refused to leave their tents and attend their duties. We'd come down hard on those, hard enough that it'd not spread, but it was all balancing on a knife's edge. The Legions had held up about the same, but the less disciplined armies had not. Most of Procer's fantassins were no longer taking orders and Hakram was so busy cracking heads to keep the Clans in line he almost hadn't been able to come today.

Of all forces only the Lycaonese had been unaffected, instead throwing a feast they'd called a 'wake' where they got drunk and spoke each other's eulogies before declaring themselves already dead and sworn to fight Keter to the last. Even Cordelia had gotten proper sloshed, I'd heard, which I was rather sad to have missed.

"Our captains are petitioning to know of the terms the Kingdom Under asked and why they have been refused," Lord Yannu told us. "That part, at least, appears to remain unknown."

"Have any of you learned where the leak came from?" Rozala asked.

I grimaced.

"I have," I admitted. "The phalanges found the source."

That had the entire room's eyes swivelling towards me, save for one pair. General Abigail Tanner stood like a woman headed for gallows with her name written on the rope, the perpetual dark rings around her eyes standing out even more starkly for her



bleak expression. With those watery blue eyes and that frazzled hair she looked like she hadn't had a good night's sleep in a year, which might well be the truth. I flicked a glance at her, nodding. She cleared her throat.

"It was the Third Army," General Abigail said. "I have standing orders for my Supply Tribune to underreport our stocks in food and goblin munitions, which made it stand out more obviously when it was on record we were a week away from running empty and we still didn't get sent anything."

It was very much against regulations to do what she'd just described, the underreporting so the Third would be sent extra stocks, but she wasn't the only one who worked her numbers along those lines. The adjunct secretariat had dug deep and found she and her officers weren't skimming, just using the extra stocks as a reserve in case supply was shaken, so she'd gotten off light. Some docked pay, a reduction of her pension and Juniper had pretty brutally chewed out. She'd blushed red enough at the screaming it had shown even on those sunburnt cheek, but the pension reduction had actually brought tears to her eyes.

That was the internal discipline of the Army of Callow, though. The problem that'd begun in her backyard had ended up much larger than that.

"How did it spread from there, general?" Razin evenly asked.

I replied in her stead.

"Her Supply Tribune's subordinates began asking questions and they found out that no space had been cleared in our camps for the arrival of fresh supplies," I said. "It was a small leap from there, and the shock of the realization was enough that several got drunk and loosened their tongues. From there, it was the simple spread of soldier's gossip."

It was unsurprising it'd spread across camps. The Grand Alliance armies were encamped close to one another and shared common walls, turning the fortified ring into something like a city of tents. With soldiers having little to do but gossip given the general idleness of a siege between assaults, the moment rumours began to spread it was a given they'd take like wildfire.

"It was my officers, so it's my fault," General Abigail said. "Can't take that back, but I offer you my apologies and my resignation."

Her tone had gotten, I thought, slightly hopeful by the end of the sentence. Though I would have liked to simply refuse her offer, it wasn't that simple. I didn't entirely have the leverage to make that decision alone, not when it was the Army of Callow that'd leaked the secret that got us into this mess. If the rest

of the Grand Alliance wanted her resignation, I'd have to give it.

"It would change nothing," First Princess Rozala said. "The cat is already out of the bag."

"It might make things worse, truly" Empress Basilia noted. "Turn her into a figurehead for the resentment to gather behind."

Yannu was less convinced.

"Is she to escape punishment, then?" he pushed.

Razin shot me a shrew look.

"Has the Army of Callow already dealt out discipline?" the Lord of Malaga asked.

"It has," I said. "No demotion, but docked pay and pension as well as some other disciplinary measures."

An argument could be made that under some regulations she should be whipped, but I wasn't sure I wanted to go there. It'd make the Third Army boiling mad if Abigail the Fox was whipped in front of our assembled soldiery.

"She should be punished for failure of command, not the mistakes of her men," Prince Otto bluntly said. "That is her crime. Going any further would be unjust."

The general's face fell and I suppressed a smile. *You're not getting out of command that easily, Tanner.* Yannu Marave remained displeased and Rozala actually seemed like she was leaning his way in practice, whatever her words, so I threw them a bone by having her added to the latrine-digging duty rotation for a week. Neither of them were actually out of blood so they were satisfied with the light humiliation, though they really should have figured out that it would only make her more popular with her men. Soldiers liked seeing generals get their hands dirty. Being born a noble came with some blind spots, I mused.

It wasn't like a brewer's daughter would be all that concerned with her lordly dignity.

Crestfallen, General Abigail retreated behind me and we moved on to the thick of the meeting. What the Hells were meant to do about any of this.

"We should make the price asked by the dwarves public," Empress Basilia suggested. "The anger should turn sentiment around."

"That's a risk," I grunted.

Rozala agreed.

"If despair wins over anger, we might well be forced to agreed to the terms of the Kingdom Under by our own armies," the First Princess said.

Yannu and Razin backed her on that, the Lord of Alava frankly stating that most the Dominion captains would not hesitate to clamour for the bargain to be struck since Levant was ceding no territory.

"Should part of our army agree while another does not, the discord could get out of hand," Chancellor Alaya said. "We cannot afford to be fighting each other instead of the dead."

The problem was that no one really had a solution. Our soldiers were rebellious because, well, we were in a fucking terrible situation. If the dwarves hung us out to dry, we were all going to die whether or not we took Keter. Or even worse, some of the most powerful nobles would make it out while everyone else died. That thought would be like tossing a lit match at oil, if it spread widely enough.

"We need to secure our supplies with reliable soldiers," Hakram said. "Else we risk of deserters attempting to grab food and take their chances with the Ossuary."

"Wise," Empress Basilia said. "Though that is only a temporary salve. We need a way to turn morale around."

And there were some ideas, so we broke up and set about trying them. First was Rozala's own notion of spreading rumours of our own to flip sentiment: namely that we intended to invade the Serenity once Keter was taken, which was farmland bearing plentiful food. It worked some, but it was an obvious ploy and our soldiers weren't dumb. There was no guarantee the Serenity would have reserves, that we would be able to reach it and to be honest a lot of the rank and file were wary at the prospect of eating anything that'd been grown in a Hell. It wasn't enough. Another day passed and the mutters of mutiny only grew.

Mali – Chancellor Alaya's suggestion was slyer and ended up more successful. A production was made of supplies being brought into the camp from outside even as word was spread that an accord might have been reached with the Kingdom Under. It was pure sleight of hand, the supplies in question coming from one of the larger flying fortresses and having been smuggled out during the night so they could be brought back when everybody was watching. It wouldn't tide us over forever, I thought, but it might be enough to muster our armies for another assault. Or it would have been, if the news did not then come from further south.

The devils were gone.

The Praesi had seized and suborned the gates before unleashing seven days' worth of devils on the dead, the main reason we were not drowning in armies as we besieged Keter, but the Dead King had not sat idle. The bindings on the devils had somehow been twisted and they were made to turn on each other, destroying themselves in an orgy of violence. They'd still emptied the southern Kingdom of the Dead of troops so it seemed like only a minor defeat, until one realized what it meant: there was no army left in the way of any deserters wanting to run south to Procer.

That night there were five attempts made on the supply stores, and though none succeeded it soured sentiment. We hanged all who attempted it publicly – two Proceran fantassin crews, a Levantine captain, Penthesians and to my distaste a tenth of legionaries from my own First Army – but however necessary the gesture it only darkened the mood further. We held council again, and this time when Basilia pushed to have the terms of the dwarven deal made public most of the people around the table were in agreement. It was Alaya and I who were the standouts again, sharing the same fear: it was going to give a lot of angry people a reason to get angry at each other.

To Basilia's honour, she was right about the League's reaction. Outrage at the demand of Penthes being ceded to the Kingdom Under was so great that there were demands made that the Grand Alliance declare war on the dwarves as well – never mind that the League was not part of the Grand Alliance, or that if the dwarves didn't feed us we were all going to fucking die. I was even forced to admit that I'd been wrong to fear the worst, at least in the immediate, since it didn't lead armies to brawl. What it did do, though, was give a halfway decent excuse for everyone wanting to sit out the battles to do it.

Proceran fantassins and levies did it by the hundreds, refusing to take up arms until the terms were accepted, while both the Blood and Chancellor Alaya began to receive petitions to accept the terms even if the rest of their allies did not. Some of the High Lords began to imply that the Praesi auxiliaries, which had until recently been household troops, might be inclined to start following their lead again should the Chancellor not do what was necessary to get them out of this mess. Tensions began to slowly rise across the camps and another council was urgently called.

"We lean on priests and heroes to shame the disobedient into line," I flatly told them. "As for the High Lords, I'll take care of it."

I retreated into my tent and slipped into the dreams of those Alaya had said were most aggressive, inflicting on them terrifying nightmares. Fear did its work: the next morning, much chastened nobles came to reiterate their absolute support for the Chancellor and her wise reign. The other half of that,

unfortunately, did not work as well. Some of the priests balked at being given orders by earthly powers, outright refusing to preach as they were told, and though Hanno convinced half the mercenaries to live up to their contract the rest chased him out. It was similarly mixed results with the levies.

The Brabantines that'd wanted to make him into a price rose up, but some of those conscripts had never so much as seen his face until Salia and they were not willing to put blind trust into a stranger. Not even one who was the Sword of Judgement.

"A successful assault on the walls would turn sentiment around," the Warlord said.

"If we could talk them into that, we wouldn't be struggling so hard in the first place," I bit out.

Even the Army of Callow was balking, which was like a thorn in my throat: every time I tried to swallow, it bit a little deeper.

"Hard measures have become necessary," Empress Basilia said.

And we all knew what she meant by that. All of us had still-reliable troops, soldiers that would obey the order to purge the disobedient if it was given. It would be a death blow to morale to bloody our soldiers into lining up for an assault, but with morale already fucked it was starting to look like the least lethal of the poisons to drink to go through with it. Reluctant agreement began to bloom across the table, but the thorn in my throat had not stung so keenly that I'd accept this. Not against soldiers that'd followed me since I was a girl, that had served unflinching through one nightmare after another until we reached the walls of Keter. I did not agree, and brusquely left the council. Juniper followed closely behind, and when we were out of the tent she took my arm. We stood there a moment, our gazes meeting as her hand stayed on me, and a knot of emotions seized her face. Shame and gratitude, anger and pride.

"Warlord," she finally said, tone thick.

Gratitude won out. We both knew it was the same soldiers whose butchery had been discussed that had put me on the throne and kept me there, and I was almost insulted that she had thought I would forget it. That I would meekly bend my neck to this.

"They won't do it without me," I tiredly replied, passing a hand through my hair. "But we can't do nothing, Juniper. Time is running out."

It had not been eight days since the Battle of the Ruins, and we both knew that the closer we got to empty stores the more violently desperate our soldiers would become.

"An assault means losses," Juniper murmured. "That means our stores last longer."

We both knew that an assault where the entire force did not participate was just throwing lives away, but that was exactly what she was proposing: getting people killed. I pulled away, feeling my bad leg throbbing. I needed to be alone. I worried at the thought like a dog gnawing at a bone, but I saw no way out. So I sat in my tent alone, a bottle of aragh open as I leaned back in my seat with my eye closed. Trying to think of something, anything, that wasn't just some variation of a butcher's knife.

The soft sound of someone entering my tent reached my ears, but I did not open my eye.

"I'm not in the mood," I called out.

"You are in one," Hakram gravelled. "Which is why you're drinking alone."

"I don't want to talk," I told him, leaning forward as my eye fluttered open. "There's been enough of that."

He looked, I saw, about as tired as I felt. Ignoring me, he sat on the other side of my desk and grabbed the bottle. He poured himself a cup so full it nearly overflowed before draining it all in one swallow.

"I don't feel much like talking either," the Warlord admitted. "It's why I'm here. For the silence."

I stared at him, unblinking, for a long time. Then I nodded. We had known a great many comfortable silences, the two of us. This would not be one of them, given the dark bent of our thoughts, but maybe it'd be more comfortable here with each other than it would have been alone. So we stayed there and we drank, an hour passing and then another. It was me who spoke, when the bottle was empty and my belly too warm.

"I thought I was done with hard measures," I murmured. "Past them. But we're never really *done* with horror, are we?"

Hakram did not answer for a long while.

"I used to wonder," he said, "if it was something we stepped into, or something we brought with us."

*And now we know*, I thought. We parted ways come dark, but I could not sleep. I felt restless, for all that there was nothing to spend my energies against. So instead I found my steps leading me to the tallest watchtower of our camp, watching over the campfires spread all around me. I stood at the edge of the drop, alone and veiled by Night, and waited. The streak of ice was

still there, the old fear that would never suffer to be entirely mastered. Fear of the drop, of the fall. An old friend.

I hated it.

"I've been fighting you since I was a girl," I told the night. "Gods, how many times did I face you?"

I had sought rooftop after rooftop, trying to scour the fear out of me, and yet here it was still.

"Even after all I've done, how far I've gone, you're still here," I said. "Still a part of me. You can be bound and blinded, kept in the cellar, but you've never been *gone*."

And how hateful was it, that even this small thing I had spent all my life trying to rid myself of could not be changed? I leaned forward, boot beginning to give against the wood, and though I knew the fall would not kill me still my stomach clenched. It was how I knew I wasn't dreaming: when I fell, in my dreams, there was never any fear. I just tumbled into the darkness, not making a sound, and I was swallowed whole. My bad leg throbbed with pain, a reminder this was anything but a dream.

"Is that the lesson?" I asked. "That it's not about getting rid of you, it's about continuing the fight?"

I thought of the night I had become the Warden, the dream of it. The faces I had worn, their warnings. *Do better*, one had whispered. *Don't flinch*, the other had ordered. And beyond them, the Beast that had waited. That I felt coil around me now, warm breath against my neck as it opened its maw.

"I don't believe that," I murmured. "Maybe there's never really an end like we want, like you get in the stories – a clean cut, a last light – but we do get to win, sometimes. If we bleed for it, if we're clever and brave and we don't bend with the current of the world."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched.

"This isn't good enough," I told Creation. "This place, this end, this taste of ash in my mouth that I know too fucking well. *It's not enough*."

And something like indignation burned in my belly, because deep down I had always wanted the world to be fair – for fairness, for good to be baked into its bones – but it wasn't. It was blind and brutal, and the only lights you found down there in the dark were the ones you'd lit.

"Maybe you don't care," I said. "Maybe it's a game to you, always was. *Fine*. But a game has rules, and I swear to anything out

there listening that in the space between those I will carve a semblance of fairness. And if you won't help me, then get the Hells out of my way."

I had told the Beast I no longer feared it and meant every word. So I closed my eye, breathing out, and left my staff.

Then I took a step forward and let myself fall.

The Beast laughed, laughed loud enough for the world to quake and to drown out the scream of my fear. But it held me tight, warmed me and lent me its strength. My Name burned bright, chasing away the dark, and finally I was able to **See**. There was an above and a below, and below me I saw them all laid out. A never-ending sprawl of objects in motion, stars in the void. All the stories, the possibilities of them, and though the enormity of it threatened to snuff out my mind like a candle the Beast kept me together. And as I fell, as the enormity came ever closer and hurried towards me, I saw what I was looking for.

An object in motion.

I opened my eye, back cold with sweat, but I was not falling. I was still on the edge of the tower, a step away from the fall and fear coiling cold in my gut. Maybe it'd always be like that. Not the fight, because there would always be a fight – if not this one, then another. Maybe it was about the victories you could steal from fear, the lights you lit. I looked up, breathing raggedly, and above me I saw the clouds of poison had parted. The night sky was a river of stars, breathtaking and depthless. I might never have thought to look up, if not for all this.

Dawn found me sleeping there, swaddled in the Mantle of Woe.

—

"Two days," I told the war council. "Give me two days."

"What have you learned, Black Queen?" Rozala Malanza asked with a frown.

"That the world is always larger than we think," I replied. "So give me two days, and I will give you a miracle."

They did. They watched me like a hawk all the while, spies and envoys dogging my every footstep and growing impatient as I did nothing more than prepare for a battle they did not think would be fought, but on the dawn of the third day an alarm was rung. An army had appeared south, its trail of dust piercing past the cover of the poison clouds. I sent a single messenger and waited at the edge of the camp while it woke up like a hive, ramparts being manned and officers sent for. But the dust parted, the army approached, and worry turned to surprise.



These were not the dead. It was an army of dwarves, thousands strong. I had seen true, then. Today would be a pivot, for us and for them.

The greats of the Grand Alliance trickled towards me, a war council forming, but I already knew what it would be about. Who was to go speak with the dwarves, they would say. And that I would go was a certainty, but there would be bickering about the rest. Too many could, while few must be sent. So I had sent a messenger for a diplomat enough of them would trust. The conversation died, smothered in the cradle, as Cordelia Hasenbach rode up to our side atop a warhorse.

"Warden," she greeted me, blue eyes sweeping over the others.

"There," I smiled at the others. "Does this compromise suffice?"

It did.

—

The Herald of the Deeps received us formally in his tent.

Not in a stiff manner, I meant, but in the same way he had once received me deep below in the Everdark: after a few courtesies were traded, small wooden bowls were brought out. Relics whose grain was left rough, without varnish or polish. Seeker Balasi himself came into the tent with an opaque glass bottle in hand, pouring half a cup's worth of *sudra* in each bowl before taking a step back. The liquor looked like wine, but its surface trailed vapour and it looked on the verge of boiling. The Herald had once told me no bottle of the drink, which dwarves used only on important talks, had ever left the Kingdom Under. The Named's green large green eyes sought out mine and he offered a respectful — though not deferential — nod.

I noticed that the staff he usually took everywhere, crooked wood adorned with metal chimes, was nowhere in sight.

"Warden," the Herald of Deeps said, "I greet you in peace."

"Herald," I replied, returning the nod. "Your arrival is an unexpected pleasure."

"Creations holds us all prisoner to its whims," he said, then turned to acknowledge my companion's presence. "Princess Cordelia."

"Herald," she calmly replied, then glanced at the bowls. "You honour us with this service."

Balasi didn't sit at the table with us, this time. He'd not approached again after taking that step back, instead standing behind the Herald with a face that might as well have been carved

out of stone. It caught Cordelia's eyes just as it did mine. The Herald had always preferred to let the deed-seeker do most the talking when it was possible. Something had changed.

"If these talks are not to be called of import," the green-eyed Named said, "I know not which deserve the word."

A pause.

"I come to fulfill our bargain, Warden."

My brow rose.

"Has Lady Sybella been recalled as negotiator for the Kingdom Under?" I asked. "I'd thought you replaced."

For a long moment, the Herald neither moved nor answered. Not so much as a blink of those luminous eyes.

"A sennight ago," the Herald of the Deeps finally said, "I entered the Hall of Hearths and sought the King Under the Mountain as he sat the Diluvian Throne before the great land-kings of our kind. I demanded of him to summon all dwarves to war and strike bargain with the Grand Alliance, so that we might end the Dead King once and for all."

My throat caught. A calmer presence in the back of my mind noted a detail: a week ago. Either this Hall of Hearths was close to here, or the dwarves had a way of travelling long distances quickly.

"And did he accept?" Cordelia quietly asked.

The green-eyed dwarf twitched in what I thought might be dismay.

"He refused," the Herald said. "And in his anger at my presumption, cast me into exile."

An exile that'd come here with an army, I thought, but my stomach was sinking even as I kept my face calm. So the Herald of the Deeps had come here with his loyalists to lend a hand to the fight. I would not turn away the help, but it was not the help we'd needed. Food was to be our saving grace, not more swords.

"But I gave an oath on my staff to fight for the terms I accepted with all my might," the dwarf quietly said. "So I did."

Cordelia stilled as I leaned forward. Power burned in the dwarf's green eyes, old and deep and without the slightest semblance of humanity to it.

"I slew the king on his throne," the Herald of the Deeps said, "and declared all of his line to be without burden or purpose. Unfit to rule."

I let out a sharp breath. Burden and purpose were the words dwarves used for Role and Name, I knew, but I had heard Balasi use them in a more religious context before. They seemed as much philosophy as namelore.

"And you got out of there alive?" I said, incredulous.

"Snapping my staff of office released the many spirits I have bound over the years all at once," the Herald said, sounding darkly satisfied. "The soldiers of the land-kings had greater concerns than to hunt me."

I felt like reaching for the drink even though it wasn't done cooling. That was, I thought, one hell of a way to resign. Still, for all that the Herald's act of defiance was impressive I was having some difficult parsing the implications of it. Fortunately, I had brought Cordelia Hasenbach with me.

"You have not come," Cordelia mildly said, "as a representative of the Kingdom Under."

The Herald grimly chuckled.

"Princess, there no longer *is* a Kingdom Under," he said. "It has been a thousand years since the Kings Under the Mountain truly ruled, but the dignity of their blood kept the land-kings as part of the same realm in name."

He bared his teeth.

"I murdered that last restraint," the Herald said. "Twice over, when I declared the bloodline unfit: no brother or sister can be ushered into the seat to serve as a fresh figurehead. Instead every land-king now claims himself the true owner of the Diluvian Throne."

"Civil war," Cordelia said.

"Not one of them but thirty," the green-eyed dwarf replied. "A hundred, even. All of the old wars let loose again, without the King Under the Mountain to call for peace when a side wishes to surrender. It will be to the death, Princess Cordelia, until the Diluvian Throne is filled once more or the empire shatters all the way through."

I honestly wasn't sure whether that was better or worse than the Herald coming here with only an army of exiles. It was now a certainty we wouldn't be getting reinforcements from the Kingdom Under, because its armies certainly sounded like they would be busy for the immediate future. Fuck, I'd hoped- wait, no. Not *all* the armies were busy, were they?

"It got the impression," I said, "that neither the lands of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Expansion were under a land-king."

From context I'd put together that they were under the authority of the King Under the Mountain, at least in principle, though in practice they'd been under the Herald himself. If their throne was empty, though, who did they now answer to?

"Clever," the Herald smiled. "It is true. Balasi and I rode the Deep River to return there ahead of even the furthest land-kings. They soldiers have answered my call."

My heart skipped a beat. That was beginning to sound rather more like what I'd hoped to get. The Fifteenth Expansion was the underground of the Kingdom of the Dead, which was filled with fortresses and soldiers. The Fourteenth was the Everdark, which was being colonized with both civilians and soldiers. Together, the regions represented a large number of soldiers. Cordelia narrowed in on another detail, though.

"This Deep River," the fair-haired princess said, "could it be used by humans?"

My eyes widened. That *was* a way out our mess, I considered. If our armies could use the Deep River to retreat from Keter after the fall of the Crown of the Dead, extreme rationing might be able to get us back to Procer without killing too many from starvation. We should be able to buy supplies from the Herald as well. Nowhere enough to feed an army our size for long, and I doubted he'd empty his stores for us entirely, but maybe long enough to be able to manage the trip back south without too many dead if we took Keter quickly enough. *There would be enough in the Everdark for all of us, but without the Twilight Ways to get them to us there's no way they'll arrive in time.* From the corner of my eye, I saw that Balasi looked amused.

"It would be death," the Herald politely replied. "The Deep River is sailed by ship, but it is not water. It is..."

A frown, a look at the deed-seeker.

"Lava," Seeker Balasi provided.

The Herald nodded, turning back to us.

"Lava. The ships are sailed empty between cities, using currents made by runes," he told us. "I could protect myself and Balasi riding one, but more would be beyond my capacity."

I sighed. Yeah, that'd been a little too good to be true. So we were back at the start, supply-wise.

"Your help in fighting Keter would be most welcome," Cordelia said, "but I must confess our armies have grown troubled. Being stranded far from home without supplies has hurt our readiness to fight."

"It would," the Herald acknowledged. "I will not apologize, for the deeds of the Kingdom Under are no longer mine to bear as burden, but I would make restitution as a sign of good will. We will surrender Lady Sybella to your hands."

I blinked.

"You captured her," I said. "Where?"

"She was a mere two days away, waiting for you to bend to her terms," the Herald replied.

My heart beat wildly and I shared a look with Cordelia, whose eyes had lit up.

"She must," I slowly said, "have been keeping the supplies close, then."

"Atop a confluence of tunnels, near the shores of the lake you call the Tomb," he nodded.

Which was far, but even if they hadn't moved them – which I doubted – it wasn't that far. We could most definitely trade for supplies with the Herald to keep our soldiers until they arrived.

"They are in your possession," Cordelia stated.

"They are," the Herald of the Deeps said. "And though I am not the Kingdom Under, I come to fulfill the terms of the bargain."

The supplies and his help against the city of Keter and attendant lands. A cession of claim that Cordelia had already convinced the Sisters to accept. *It's better than if he was still part of the Kingdom Under*, I thought. The Herald could make a kingdom of his own out here while the rest of his kind fought it out for the throne, which would ensure his fragile beginnings were not simply annexed by whoever ruled close. *And it creates a state that has an interest in keep the Kingdom Under split so it never turns around to gobble them up, which is even better.* There was no real way for humans to meddle in that mess, but the Herald and his successors would be a different story.

Some of the drow might push for taking back their homeland when the enemy was still weak, I decided, but that trouble was years down the line and not impossible to navigate besides. I glanced at Cordelia, whose face was calm. She gave me a slight nod of agreement, also thinking it the right decision. So I reached for the bowl and took it in hand, raising it.

"Then I greet you in war, Herald of the Deeps," I said.

They matched me and we all drank deep, the sudra smooth all the way down and leaving that faint taste of copper behind.

We drank, and it felt like a light being lit.

## **Interlude: Calls**

*"Mind your sentiments, for they have a mind of their own."*

*– Proceran saying*

It was a sultry night, as Keter's tended to be.

The heat was poisonous and unease thrummed through the camps like a pulsing vein. The arrival of the dwarves – a story heavily curated before it was released to the soldiers, though Akua had heard the full of it from the source – had given the Grand Alliance hope of victory once more, but all still remembered the last assault on Keter's walls. Much death had achieved nothing, and none were eager to be the tip of the spear when tomorrow came. It was certain death, all agreed, and even the ever-loyal Army of Callow was balking at the thought of being thrown into the grinder headfirst. None of that, though, was truly Akua's concern.

Perhaps if she had made different choices she would be leading the Dread Empire into the breach come dawn, or unleashing some horrible sorcery serving as Malicia's own treacherous Warlock, but it was not to be. Fingers tightened around her cup – a golden goblet set with opals, one of the few gifts she'd received as empress-claimant that she had liked – and she drank deep of the Cantal red. It was about to become a much rarer find, Akua thought. Procer would have better use for good land than vineyards in the coming decades, and that meant many vintages were on the verge of disappearance.

Perhaps for good. The world, these days, seemed set on changing.

"So best enjoy it while I still can, yes?" Akua murmured.

Fingers tightened around the cup again, her lips wet but far from sated. She did not regret making the choice she had in the heart of the Tower, not even now. Her eyes closed, thinking of the sound the match had made as she scratched it against stone, all Akua Sahelian felt was guilty relief. That she had not been trapped on that chair, chained to that fate. Made to go through a lifetime of empty motions, screaming inside. And yet as the days passed, she found that frustration had begun nipping at her

heels. She traced the golden rim of the cup with her thumb, absent-minded.

"Vanity," she told the night, neither quite asking nor stating.

There was no one else in the tent for her to speak to, after all. The Army of Callow, while it tolerated her presence and many rumours had come from her departure and return to Catherine's side – some expected, like that it had been a scheme from the two of them from the start, others rather more amusing like Akua having found the Black Queen a better lover than the Empress and so turned her cloak again – would never be comfortable with her tent being too deep in its camp. She had never felt threatened, of course. Dartwick had ensured none would lay hands on her few possessions, ever dutiful, and Masego had kindly wards around her tent on her behalf until she gained her own magic back.

But she would never be welcome there, in the beating heart of Catherine's kingdom of soldiers, and though she was not one to shy from hatred she had found she preferred setting her tent near the edges of the camp. In Keter that was not so far out, given the nature of the siege walls, but it had been far enough that she had been able to obtain a view of the Crown of the Dead looming in the distance.

"And if there was ever a reason to drink," she snorted, toasting the tall walls and the horrors still lying in wait behind them.

She drank, but it settled the restlessness in her belly no more than the other sips had. Vanity, she'd hazarded, but she was not so sure it was true. Akua was one of the great spellcasters of this siege, treated with the same awe as the Witch of the Woods or the Hierophant without having a Name of her own, but months ago she had been the fulcrum of an ancient empire's fate. She had been... more than she now was. That night in Serolen had not scratched the itch, only drawing attention to it. There had been a moment where it was all in her hands once more, and she had been able to *decide*.

It had felt good, returning to Masego what had been unjustly denied him. Of all the Named she had known, only Hierophant had never wavered from that bright, impossibly clear moment that defined your Name. He had, from the beginning to the end, stayed true to himself. If such sincerity was not worthy of a good turn, what possibly could?

But the days had passed and Serolen now felt like a world behind. So now Akua Sahelian sat alone in the dark, drinking wine soon to be as much of a relic and looking at the heart of the darkness in the distance. The Dead King's subtle, creeping malevolence – so incredibly banal, until the pit of despair swallowed you up. She drank and wondered if it was vanity, to think she should be more than simply a spellhand in this war. Perhaps it was. Before she

could be moved to decide whether that answer would be found at the bottom of a fourth cup of Cantal red, there was a whisper in the back of her mind.

Her wards had been set off. Curious, and not feeling particularly threatened, she lowers the threshold to allow for the entrance of they who would enter her tent. The flap was parted and a man's silhouette – ah, was that the slightest shiver of disappointment she felt? – entered, straightening before sniffing the air.

"Wine in the dark on the eve of a battle?" Kendi Akaze scorned, lighting a magelight with the flick of his wrist. "How very maudlin, Sahelian."

Akua was not sure what was worse. That he had come, or that some part of her was dimly pleased for it. Kendi was tall man, with a sculpted beard and the pale brown eyes of a mfuasa. Hatred of her never left them, which had learned to find a reassuring weight. It had been the one thing whose sincerity she did not need to doubt.

"That was my very aim," Akua easily replied. "How kind of you to compliment me so."

He took a seat across from her, not asking permission, and helped himself to her wine.

"You are growing comfortable again," Kendi said.

"Is that why you're here?" she asked.

The dark-skinned man eyed her with distaste.

"Why else would I be in your presence?"

Akua had spent several months being taught how best to use her looks, when she had been younger, and the lessons had not left her. It was the easiest thing in the world to shift in her seat so that her dress would call attention to the curve of her breasts, that the line of her legs would be put in display.

"I wonder," Akua replied, tone languid. "Can you truly think of nothing else?"

His eyes did not dip and he hardly seemed enticed. Hatred truly was a most useful thing.

"You are wrong, as it happens," Akua continued, shifting back into a more comfortable pose. "Comfort escapes me."

It was foolish to tell him as much, she knew. She was no longer as she had been in Ater, dazed and despairing. She ought to know better. And yet, looking at the man whose sister she had gotten killed for... what? She could hardly even tell, now. Looking at



that brown-eyed man, she still saw the same thing she had when she had first spared him: her past made into a man. A voice speaking for the long line of sisters and daughters she had led to their deaths and never given a second thought to. No, it was only natural that it was not Catherine who had come to visit her tonight.

This one was an older ghost, with a deeper claim.

"Does it?" Kendi said. "You are returned to the Warden's side. Again in her service and confidence. What doors are to be closed to you, after this war?"

Akua drank.

"There is no after this war," she said, setting down the goblet. "She loves me more than she hates me, I think, but that is not forgiveness. Never will be."

Kendi Akaze smiled.

"Ah, Callowans," he said. "They do have their virtues."

"Are you satisfied?" Akua asked.

"No," he replied.

Her jaw clenched.

"I will have no part of Cardinal," she said. "That is certain. Or of the Confederation of Praes. And there will be no place for me in the lands of the Grand Alliance. Even if I survive I..."

There would be nowhere to go, she realized, perhaps for the first time. She had known it, deep down, but never spoken the truth out loud and made herself face it. Ashur always took Praesi exiles and it should not be difficult to live in the League, but what kind of a life would those be? An exile, sometimes called upon when of use but otherwise kept in the darkest hole they could find. A shameful secret, kept around only in case she was needed. Everything she was growing to hate about where she now stood, only a thousand times more so. *I would have once been satisfied with this*, she thought. *Seen it as a victory, living to begin another rise to prominence.*

Now all the prospect made her feel was exhausted.

"You will not be anything but you," Kendi softly said. "And I can conceive few curses worse than that, Akua Sahelian."

"So that is your purpose," she said, tone mocking. "You come here to remind me that I should live so that your tortured sense of vengeance might be satisfied?"

"I don't care whether you keep breathing, Sahelian," Kendi said, sounding honest. "I want the vicious, empty thing that killed so many of us and lit the world aflame to *suffer*. Whether you are to serve as her prison or her coffin is not so important."

"So why save my life in Ater?" Akua harshly replied. "If you had not removed Malicia's killing-"

"She would have snuffed you out like a candle," Kendi acknowledged. "And what right did she have to that, after all she has done? It took more than a single pair of hands to craft the Folly. It would have been disgusting, for the Empress to pretend to pass judgement over you when all know she helped the deed along."

"So only you can judge me?" she laughed. "How highly you think of yourself, Kendi."

"It's not me either," the man smiled. "I would just burn you, Sahelian. End it, look for peace among the ashes of you. But my sister's shade demands better. So I will usher you through this journey until you reach your end."

"I don't understand what you *want* from me," she snarled. "That I open my own throat? That I leap into a chasm? Would it truly mean that much more to you if I did the deed myself?"

"Is that," Kendi evenly asked, "what you think would even the scales?"

"There's no evening those scales," Akua tiredly replied. "Even a fool would see that."

He watched her in silence

"Even should I live forever and save a life every morning, it would change nothing," she continued. "It's not as simple as lives lost."

She had seen that in Ater, the cascade of suffering her atrocity had begun. The Folly had been an enormity, the amount of death it represented, but that had only been the tree above the ground. There were even greater roots below, out of sight, and how could those even be tallied for? Made up for? Redemption by number was an empty exercise, meaningful only in the abstract.

"So you do nothing?" he asked.

"I am to be jailor to the Dead King," Akua said. "Bound forever to keep him imprisoned."

There were still enough of the Twilight Ways for this to be possible. Liesse, it seemed, was not a city she would ever leave behind. He cocked his head to the side.

"And you chose this?"

She did not answer. It would have been a lie to say that she had, though it would have been another to say she had not. He shook his head, disgusted.

"Then it means nothing," Kendi said. "Will forever mean nothing."

He rose to his feet, leaving behind a cup of wine almost entirely untouched.

"Just another fate picked out for you."

Her heart clenched and she turned away, failing to keep her face calm. The mfuasa snorted, killing the light with a flick of the wrist and making to leave. Akua looked out at the walls of Keter, knowing she should keep silent. She did not.

"What was her name?" she asked.

Kendi's steps stuttered.

"Do you care?" he asked.

Akua looked down at her hands.

"Enough to ask," she finally replied.

"Sura. Her name was Sura."

The name echoed in the silence he left in his wake. Akua's fingers reach for her neck, finding only warm skin for all that she had imagined otherwise. She had felt as if she would find something, as if her fingers would have been able to tell her which it was.

A noose or a knot.

—

There were not many Rhenians with the army.

Cordelia had only summoned south a quarter of Rhenia's army at the beginning of the war, leaving the rest to hold the Rhenian Gates and her capital, and of those thousands now only a few hundred were left. The rest were long dead, their lives spent defending people they loved little so very far from home. Cordelia did all in her power to ensure the survivors were all comfortable and provided before she allowed herself to rest. Prince Otto had not neglected them, but the princess felt better for having put a hand to the labour – however scarce the necessity of it.

In truth, if one was to speak of neglect the word should be laid at her feet. How very little she had done for her people, not only Rhenians but all Lycaonese, since the war had begun. That no grudge seemed to be held by her soldiers over the fact she'd not so much as stepped foot in Rhenia during the entire war only worsened the guilt. Gods, sometimes she saw the pride in the eyes of her countrymen and it *burned*.

"You bargained everything to keep us alive," Otto Reitzenberg solemnly told her when they drank at the wake. "Even your throne. What more could we ask of you, Hasenbach?"

Coming from the man who had so bitterly fought to keep Twilight's Pass from falling, it had felt like a slap in the face. All the more for the way she knew he had meant every word, for Otto Redcrown was not what one would call a skilled liar. It was like none of them could see she had abandoned them, named them the sacrifice needed to keep Procer breathing through the first black months of the war. *Are we truly so used to doing the dying*, she thought, *that it no longer matters?* It was a dark thought, though far from the darkest she had been left to wrestle with.

Worst of all was the increasingly possible way they were about to lose the war.

Cordelia no longer sat in the war councils. She still had the status to, as a princess, but Malanza would rather bite off her own thumb than sit besides her and had instead taken to bringing Prince Otto to keep the Lycaonese bound to her. Wise, considering how estranged her people had grown from most of Procer during the war. It was not impossible for large swaths of the northwest to secede from the Principate, if the aftermath of the war was poorly handled. If there was an aftermath at all, anyhow. For though Cordelia no longer sat the councils, she still had access to several of those who sat them and to the formal supply documents besides. The picture both painted, when placed together, was a dark one. With the arrival of the dwarves starvation was no longer at risk, but that was no promised victory.

The Grand Alliance was, by Cordelia's estimation, two failed assaults away from collapse.

It was a broad estimate, relying on a number of casualties equal or greater to those of the first attempt – counting both the field battle and the storm – but she knew it to be correct. Another sixty thousand dead would only lessen the army's numbers around to half of what had first been brought north, but all the forces here were not equal. Or, for that matter, united. Every nation had its own host, but it was worse than that. The League alone fielded multiple different armies, and Procer still divided itself into the hosts under First Princess Rozala and Otto Redcrown. That was not without sense, but it meant that

casualties could not be counted as if the force were a single army.

One of the principles of war her uncle had taught her as a girl had been that an army became unable to fight long before all its soldiers were dead. A host was an intricate machine, needing many different parts to keep functioning: horsemen and skirmishers, regulars and outriders. Losing any of those parts – or even too large a portion of one – could be an army's doom. That principle, when applied to the Grand Alliance forces, became a curse. Which armies would start collapsing into uselessness first, when casualties kept racking up? Cordelia believed it would be League's, whose individual armies were smallest and so most vulnerable to this, but she could not be sure.

The war had taught her that when a battle went bad levies died like flies, and Procer's forces still had an uncomfortably large amount of them.

Two defeats, she thought, and the Grand Alliance would have broken enough of its component armies that it would be impossible to take Keter. That was what her investigations had revealed, the ugly truth behind the coming acts of valour: valour alone would not be enough. Even if the broken armies were thrown into the grinder as expendables, it would not suffice. The coalition would fail and when it did Calernia's days would be numbered. Procer would fall, dragging with it the rest of the continent. Too many undead, no one left to stop them. And that would leave Cordelia with a hard choice, perhaps the hardest she'd ever had to make.

Bet it all on hope, some unforeseen salvation, or kill many to save the rest.

A mug was pressed into her hand and Cordelia almost started. Agnes was smiling at her sideways, the two of them alone in her tent. The Augur patted her arm.

"You think too much about what you see," Agnes chided.

Cordelia considered herself a tolerant woman, but the irony in that sentence was too thick for even her to swallow.

"You cannot-" she began, then her eyes narrowed. "You did that on purpose. You are teasing me."

Agnes looked inordinately proud, nodding as she brushed back her hair. The once-short bob had grown a little longer over the last few months, one of the first changes to her cousin's appearance since she had become Chosen.

"They always said I'm the funny Hasenbach," she noted.

Cordelia almost winced. 'They' had not meant that nicely as Agnes was understanding it. Being from even a branch line of the House of Hasenbach had ensured that none would dare to harass her cousin even when she had still been known as only a young girl overly fond of birdwatching, but it had not kept her safe from rumours. Or being ignored with varying degrees of politeness. Chasing off the memories, she took Agnes' hand in her own.

"You are getting better," Cordelia happily said. "For months now you have been growing into the present."

Away from the past and visions of what might be.

"It's a little confining," Agnes admitted. "Things only have one meaning and I have to listen when people talk."

"The grand curse of civil society," she drily replied. "You will get used to it in time."

"Maybe," the Augur said, wrinkling her nose, then smiled. "But mead is good. I don't know why they wouldn't let me drink at feasts."

*Because your father disappeared down the bottle when your mother died, Cordelia thought, and none of us wanted you to follow him down that hole.*

"I cannot imagine why," she lied.

Agnes shot her a suspicious look, which moved Cordelia halfway to tears. For years now she'd been watching her cousin – the last of her blood, now – wasting away, devoured from the inside by her Choosing. Before she'd left Salia, Agnes would not have been able to read a room enough to be suspicious. Much less express it so openly. Guilt followed, as it so often did these days. *I asked so much of you, Cordelia thought. Advice to avoid disaster or steer enemies into it. Only now do I begin to grasp how much it truly took from you.* Too much. She would never again ask for augury.

Sometimes it felt like Cordelia had lived all her life taking from others, like some dragon from an old tale gathering all the gold of the world at her feet so she might make a kingdom of her greed.

"Boo," Agnes muttered. "Boo, Cordelia, booo."

She swallowed a smile.

"Now you are just going with the fashion, Agnes," the princess replied. "For shame."

They both smiled. It had been most of a year now, Cordelia thought, since the two of them only had each other left. Since Uncle Klaus had died, striding out of his life and straight into

the legends of the Iron Prince's last charge. There were still Hasenbachs alive of course, she'd made sure the line would continue. Two distant cousins of hers were in Salia and one more in Rhenia itself, but Cordelia had never known any of them more than passingly. They were not *family* in the way that Agnes was and her uncle had been.

"Your mood is falling again," Agnes said.

"I fear I might not be very good company tonight," Cordelia admitted.

"You're the one I chose," Agnes shrugged. "What had you looking so sad?"

"I was thinking of family," she vaguely replied.

The other woman hummed.

"Prince Klaus, then," she said.

The two of them had never been close, Cordelia knew. There was no shared blood, Agnes found violence repellant and Uncle Klaus had been uncomfortable around powers he did not understand. It had not been a recipe for deep fondness, for all that the two of them had spent years at her side.

"Death leaves so much unfinished," Cordelia replied.

She had never reconciled with the man who had been something between a father and a grandfather to her while being neither by blood.

"That's the wrong way to look at it," Agnes said. "It's life where you don't finish things. Death is always complete."

The fair-haired princess cocked her head to the side.

"I do not follow," she admitted.

"Death's a closed circle," Agnes said. "A single act. Sometimes it matters and sometimes it doesn't, but it's never..."

She grimaced, groping for words.

"Continuous," Agnes finished, satisfied. "It's why you can make something so large of a moment so small: you can't undo it after by acting the other way. The circle is closed."

"Is that something you saw?" Cordelia asked. "I thought that these last few months..."

"It's not the Gods," Agnes said, shaking her head. "And I haven't seen much since I left Salia. They understand that sometimes to have to save your strength."

"Do they?" Cordelia asked, almost accusing.

It had been a long few months, a long few years. Perhaps even a long life. The Augur hummed again.

"I don't think they understand much, actually," Agnes mused. "Not like people do. It's why there's Good and Evil, so there's rules, because they *do* understand rules."

"Good is not an immovable absolute," Cordelia said. "Above was once worshipped by those who kept slaves, Agnes."

"The rules change," her cousin agreed. "But I think that's part of what they want too."

"Many have gone mad trying to understand the Gods," the princess warned.

"I'll be all right," Agnes reassured her. "Since I was already like that."

The utterly inappropriate laugh that got out of her ripped itself out of her throat as her cousin sat smiling and pleased.

"You need to laugh more," Agnes told her. "It will do you good. Maybe find a lover."

Cordelia almost rolled her eyes. As if now was the time for such diversions.

"If we are to speak of lovers," she said, "perhaps I should be drinking more."

"My mug is already empty," Agnes informed her, then batted her eyes.

Cordelia would have refused her, but it had been the better part of a decade since she'd seen her cousin act so much like the girl she'd once been. She did not have the heart to tell her no, rising to her feet and going into the back of the tent – where she did keep a few bottles of wine for guests, and mead for family. At the rate Agnes was going through them, she would run out of the mead before the siege – or the world – ended. The blue-eyed princess chose one of the older bottles and straightened, though she froze when she heard a rattling gasp coming from the other side of the tent.

She hurried back to find her cousin leaning over the table, writing on parchment with a shaky hand.



"Agnes?" she called out.

Her cousin did not reply. She set down the mead on the table and knelt by her cousin's side, finding the other woman utterly absorbed in her writing – and hiding it from prying eyes. She finished writing after a moment, blew on the ink to dry it, and then folded the piece of parchment. Only then did she take her eyes off it and sag into her seat, breath irregular. Her skin had paled and was beaded with sweat.

"Agnes," Cordelia quietly said, "what have you done?"

The Augur sought out her hand, threaded their fingers together and squeezed it.

"I saved my strength but it wasn't enough," Agnes croaked. "I'm sorry."

She forced her tone to be even.

"Are you healthy?" Cordelia asked. "Should I call for a healer?"

"I couldn't see everything," Agnes said. "Just glimpses. But it doesn't matter."

The Augur's eyes began bleeding and it was no longer a question worth asking. Cordelia shouted for a healer, for help.

"If it's a bet," Agnes murmured, "then I always make the same."

"Agnes," Cordelia urgently said, "stay awake. I don't-"

"Don't read what I wrote until you need to," the Augur told her. "You'll know when."

"Agnes," Cordelia hissed, cold terror in her gut. *"Don't leave me."*

"I'm sorry," she replied, smiling and bloody and heart-breakingly pale. "I wish we could have gone home."

A shiver.

"Don't follow too quickly."

By the time the healers ran into the tent, Cordelia Hasenbach was holding the hand of a corpse.

## Chapter 57: Dawn

*"Only two things can get a soldier through war: courage or good legs."*

*-Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow*

An hour before dawn the camp would begin to stir, but I woke up even before that.

It was almost a mercy. My sleep was rarely anything but fitful – always returning to that night of green flames and red hands – and there were only so many times I could wake up soaked in sweat before I lost taste for turning over and burying my head under a pillow. In the dark before the dawn I found a fire, my still sleepy guards spread out around me, and overcooked a pair of eggs. The bacon rashers were fine, though, and boiling water was transmuted into tea by the twin magics of patience and costly foreign imports. I wolfed down the meal and warmed my hands against the mug, sipping it at it while it was still hot enough to scald my tongue.

My duties had yet to wake up and I wasn't going to be squeezing into my battle armour any sooner than I needed to, so after I polished off the last of tea I got up to stretch my limbs. A walk around camp would do the trick, and though my guards seemed intent on following I dismissed them. I was now entirely awake, and so I could feel a string of fate pulled taut across the air. Not the battle's, it was too small for that, but not a small matter either. Best to have a look before someone got around to plucking it, I figured.

My limp was unhurried, as I knew I would not be late. I tread the broad avenues of the Army of Callow's camp, then the narrower alleys of the Dominion's all the way into the messy sprawl of Procer's sea of tents. Past a company of fantassins sleeping in the rough like corpses abandoned on a field, I found a half-broken watchtower – laid low by shoddy workmanship, not the Enemy's blows – and a silhouette atop stairs. A man's, leaning against the low shattered wall as if it were a balustrade, and though the cloak was a faded brown I recognized the build well enough. He did not turn as I went up to join him, though he would have heard me coming.

He was, I saw, staring at the dark and distant shape of the Crown of the Dead.

I squeezed myself in at the edge of the wall, leaning my staff against it and my shoulders against the irregular stone. In the gloom before day began to glow, Keter was difficult to make out even to my Night-blessed eyes. It was as some large beast curled up on an island of nothingness, unmoving but far from asleep. No one could look at the Dead King's capital for long without getting the impression that it was somehow looking back at you.

"How did you find me?" Hanno of Arwad asked.

I glanced his way, having to twist to do so with my flesh and blood eye – the angle was bad. He'd always been a tall a broad sort, Hanno, with a working man's frame and a working man's hands. It suited the plain but honest face, which, while not so serene as it had been when he still served Judgement had kept a sense of calm to it. He was not easy to ruffle. Yet this morning, before daylight and other's eyes caught up to us, he was allowing unease to reach his face.

"I followed a string," I said. "It's a thing I do now and then."

"Mysterious," he replied, appreciative. "Another ten years of this and you will drive young Named utterly mad."

"Hey, if I actually make it to old age it's my goddamn right to mess with the young," I shrugged. "It's not like Evil offers a pension or anything. They're a stingy lot."

He snorted.

"I cannot tell whether that's blasphemy or not," the dark-skinned man admitted.

"I'm getting that a lot these days," I mused, "which seems unfair, given that I'm the high priestess of an entire religion."

"One centred," Hanno said, "largely around theft and murder."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"And?"

"There's a saying about birds of a feather that seems appropriate," he serenely replied, "but I believe you'd never forgive me the pun."

"You *do* know me," I conceded.

I let the silence fall comfortably, settle in a bit. Then I struck with my usual finesse.

"So, glaring at Keter," I said.

He stirred at my side.

"A roundabout question?"

"If you came here for the view," I shrugged, "waiting after dawn might have worked better."

I'd not drag it out of him with a hook and rope, if he did not want to talk, but I suspected that if that were true my feet would not have led me here. I'd been on the other end of this

kind of conversation often enough not to mistake reluctance with refusal.

"I never sleep well before battles," Hanno reminded me.

I didn't reply. We both knew not sleeping and coming out here weren't the same thing.

"I find myself irritated," he finally said.

Huh. Never heard that one out of him before. I cocked my head to the side.

"With?"

"Too many people," he tiredly said. "Which serves to tell me the troubles does not lie with them."

"Ah," I said.

He moved, craning his neck to look at me.

"Ah?" he asked.

"Ah," I confirmed.

He rolled his eyes at me.

"What you mean, 'ah'?" he pressed.

"That I'm not surprised," I said. "You're close enough to being Named that you can use an aspect and ride providence, but you haven't claimed one openly. Talking from experience, it's not a pleasant position to stay in."

My Name of Squire had died a long death in the throes of Winter, a span of time I'd spent fighting some of the most dangerous heroes on the continent and trifling with lesser gods. I remembered well what it had been like to have the Role without the rest.

"Even a saint with get tetchy," I elaborated, "if he keeps sitting on a spiked seat for too long."

"I do not claim sainthood," Hanno evenly said.

*Never stopped anyone from tossing it at your feet*, I thought, but true as that was it would be of no help at all.

"Can't blame you," I drawled instead. "Laurence was enough to put me off it too."

He wasn't quite amused – he remembered the Saint of Swords far more fondly than I did – but the growing tension in his shoulders

loosened. Keeping an eye on him, I decided not to prod him any further. He had the look of a man chewing on his own thoughts. If the taste was foul enough he'd spit them back out anyways, yeah? And to think they'd said I would never learn patience.

I'd been patient enough to outlive most the fuckers, so how about that.

"There is a Name there for the taking," Hanno finally said. "All I would need to do was reach out."

"But you haven't," I observed.

Obvious, but it'd keep him talking.

"I have turned away from it twice now," he confessed, passing a hand through his close-cropped hair.

My brow rose and I had to repress the urge to let out a low whistle. No wonder he was feeling antsy. He was fighting off his own transition. When he'd become a claimant to Warden of the West he'd ceased being the White Knight, though at least one of his old aspects had lingered. In the wake of renouncing that claim and my rising to fill the Role, *what* exactly Hanno of Arwad was had remained up in the air. By the sound of it, he'd been struggling with that question just as much as the rest of us.

I didn't bother to ask what the Name he was shying away from was. I had my suspicions, but in truth it didn't particularly matter. A Name was just the crystallization of what you were supposed to be, what you were supposed to do. The red, the life of it was in the Role. It was what we struggled with, far more than whether a Champion should be Valiant or Unconquered. So the 'what' was an afterthought, really, in face of the question that *did* matter.

"Why?"

The word had him scowling. It was a rare sight and I almost found myself staring at it: it was, well... human. Not that Hanno had ever been alien in the way that some other Named could become, all cold and power stripped of everything else, but there'd always been something a little aloof about him. The calm, the serenity on his face and in his eyes, it was fitting for a White Knight. Expected almost. But it was something to admire, not to understand, because who could ever really understand certainty that absolute? And now he was scowling, almost childishly. I smiled.

"And what has you so amused?" Hanno challenged.

"When I was a kid," I said, "I sometimes felt like the world was caught in amber. Maybe not every part, but those that mattered at least. That nothing important ever really *changed*."

I traced the edge of the rough stone with my fingers.

"But we did change it," I said, almost disbelieving. "It didn't really feel like it was what we were doing at the time, but we *did*. And now that I know how to look for it..."

All those years of swimming against the tide, of blood and mud and tears, they'd given birth to the first tremors of a new age. Still fragile, uncertain, but the signs were there. In the way that the Dominion was starting to circle around Razin and Aquiline like they were the sun of Levant, in the way that goblins drew on Night and planned to raise halls as far as the Morgentor, in that the empress of my youth was now a chancellor and a girl I'd once thought was now the heiress to my crown. Gods, these days I counted Procer as a halfway steady ally and looked forward to spending time with *Cordelia Hasenbach*. Somehow, along the way, we'd changed the world without even noticing.

But now that I could see it-

"... it's everywhere," Hanno quietly finished, eyes returning to the Crown of the Dead.

Calloused hands pulled closed, as if he was trying to catch something eluding his grasp. He let out a long, shuddering breath.

"Except me," Hanno of Arwad said. "It's everywhere except me, Catherine."

So my instinct had been right.

"You can be the White Knight again," I said.

"The same Name," he said, "that I walked away from."

I hummed.

"Aspects?" I asked, tone gone professional.

A trick that'd always served me well. Sound like you have a right to ask a question and most people will answer before they realize you're there to buy fish and there's really no reason you should be told about how much getting their horse shoed cost at Billy King's smithy. Too much had been the answer. Brother Desmond had been right, the old bastard had been a swindler.

"One stayed," Hanno said. "Two faded."

I grimaced. That poor man. For an aspect to stick through a Name being lost and then being reclaimed, it'd have to be so intrinsic to who he was that it was more about Hanno of Arwad than whatever else he ended up being. I didn't know what Hanno had gone through

for **Recall** of all powers to end up qualifying for that, but I doubted it must have been singularly unpleasant.

"Then it's not really the same Name, is it?" I pointed out.

"You were the Squire twice," he said, with the blithe assurance of someone who'd peered at many of my secrets through dead men's eyes. "Did you think it a different Name simply for having different aspect?"

"I was a different person," I replied. "It's why I didn't get Learn or Struggle. I didn't feel like I was so out of my depth anymore."

In the wake of First Liesse, I had been a victor: over Akua, over the High Lords, in some ways even over the Empire. My plan to claw back some sort of local rule over Callow had been a success and I'd been granted lands by Malicia herself. I'd not felt like I was one misstep away from death at all times anymore, and my Name had reflected that confidence.

"But it was the same *Name*," Hanno insisted. "Meant for the same purposes. Changing the horses on carriage does not make it a different carriage."

"There's an argument to be made that it does," I drily replied. "Since you never step in the same river twice and all, but I'll leave that bit of philosophy to the Atalantians. Why are you so keen on a Name always being meant for the same purposes, anyway? Even if it were true, it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing."

"You have to ask?" he tiredly said. "You are the one who forced me to look that mistake in the eye."

I blinked at him.

"*You're standing where everyone else started and calling it a journey*," Hanno quoted.

My own words, I realized after a heartbeat. From that night in Salia, when I'd had him at my mercy and savaged him with every hard truth I could find.

"I'd thought that rolled right off you," I admitted. "Like most of what I said that night."

"Even if you had been entirely my enemy," he replied, "I would have thought on the words after. It is a dangerous thing to fear self-examination."

Sounded a lot like 'the innocent have nothing to fear' to me, a sentence generally spoken by people who should not be trusted with even butter knives, but I'd sit on that opinion instead of

sharing it. He had a right to his own beliefs, and there were more than a few reasons I'd not ended up dressing in white.

"All right, so you self-examined," I said, distantly glad Indrani was not there to make a filthy joke of that. "How'd that end up with you here and staring down stone walls?"

"Because I fear that you might not have been wrong," Hanno said. "It was... I struggled with the decision to act, Catherine. To sunder myself from providence and the Tribunal, however silent, and take matters into my own hands. But I did, and I began to act."

His jaw clenched.

"And now I am to be the White Knight again?" he said. "To return where I began and sweep away all the doubts I wrestled with, the decisions I made, like fallen trinkets fit only for trash."

He angrily laughed.

"It was not a journey at all," Hanno told me. "I just walked in a circle so I could put on the same old cloak. All that grief, all these dangers and struggles and deaths, and what do I have to show for it?"

So that was it, huh. He'd thought he was becoming someone else, that he'd learned something. It must have been a bitter pill to swallow, the Creation itself seemed to think otherwise. At least in his eyes, anyway.

"Two aspects," I said.

He turned to me, frowning.

"You want to use a Name as measure of who you are, like Creation's some sort of fair judge?" I challenged. "I can't agree, but fair enough. You'll have to follow through, though: Creation judged you different enough from who you used to be that two out of three aspects faded."

"It's the same carriage," Hanno flatly said, echoing his earlier words.

"Maybe," I said. "But it's not the same horses pulling it, or the same man riding it – so why does it have to be headed to the same place?"

He looked away. Not convinced, huh. I wasn't fool enough to be disappointed.

"Perhaps it would be for the best if it did," he finally said. "For all that I chose to act, I have few gains to show for it."



The Gigantes have not come, and the claim I troubled the Grand Alliance to press was a trap."

I hid my surprise. It was the first time I'd heard he'd reached out to the Titanomachy, though that was actually something I halfway appreciated. Cordelia had gotten some goodies out of dealing with the giants, but however skilled a diplomat she was being Proceran had ensured all paths would turn into dead ends. Both Hanno and the Witch of the Woods were said to have deep ties to the Gigantes, though, and a personal connection might have yielded results where formal talks had not. A shame it hadn't. Mind, you all of this was babbling nonsense.

"Yeah, you didn't produce enough results to turn around the literal end times in, like, eight months of trying your hand at it tops," I drily said. "Just terrible, Hanno. Soon children will begin stoning you in the streets."

He sent me a long-suffering look.

"Must you?"

"Sure, when you're being an idiot," I easily replied. "You tried, Hanno. Maybe you didn't pull miracles out of thin air – more like not enough of them – but that doesn't mean you were wrong to act. You made some things better and some things worse."

I snorted.

"That's better than I fucking managed to pull off, some years."

Or Cordelia, for that matter. He mulled on that, silent, and I did not interrupt. Instead I looked to the distance, where on the edge of the horizon light was fast approaching. The gift of the Sisters told me dawn was soon to come.

"The world was never simple," Hanno murmured. "But I do miss them sometimes, the days when my role in it could be."

"Enough to go back?" I asked.

He did not answer. I stayed by his side, the two of us keeping in a strangely comfortable silence, until dawn rose to find us.

—

The silence was deafening.

Almost two hundred thousand soldiers stood around Keter, a fortified camp encircling that island of stone and death surrounded by nothingness, yet I could hear every cough. Empress Basilia had left with the Proceran cavalry, marching to the plains of the Ossuary to fight the battle that would keep our back clear as we stormed Keter. The rest of us – Levant, Callow,

Procer and Praes – were mustered for war, for the slaughter about to begin. I sat Zombie's back in full armour, perched atop a now-empty watchtower, and below me the ranks of the Army of Callow were splayed out. It was not the last two bridges they were readied for, not this time.

Across the lines of legionaries cut massive, segmented steel bridges. Pickler's creations. Not long enough to reach across the chasm to the top of the rampart, for the amount of steel needed for it would have been prodigious, but long enough for our purposes. There was a glint of light at my side, which bloomed into a circle when I granted it a glance. Masego's face appeared within.

"We are ready," Hierophant said. "When does it begin?"

"On the hour," I said, "though it will be First Princess Rozala that-"

"FORWARD!"

The air shuddered from the force of the call, which would have been fit to burst eardrums near the source. Still, the Proceran mages we'd trained at the Arsenal had done what they needed to: Rozala Malanza's voice had been heard by every soul in the Grand Alliance army. Not that the order applied to all of them.

"Understood," Hierophant said, and cut the spell.

My soldiers did not move, standing there as the wind picked up and the ozone scent of magic filled the air. Across the last two bridges, Proceran and Levantine soldiers began their advance on the enemy bastions. Streaks of roiling darkness shot up past the tall walls of Keter, the first wave of the enemy's rituals – curses so powerful they were sickening even for me to look upon – howling at our advancing forces. Our answer was well-oiled. Our own rituals shot up: the eerie dust-ghosts of binders, great spears of lightning from the Army of Callow and curses just as vile from the Praesi. Magic collided against magic, power spent to no gain but the stalemate we had been aiming for.

"Now," I murmured. "Now, Artificer."

Obeying my order without ever having heard it, the Blessed Artificer at least unleashed the wonder she had crafted in Salia and refined over the months since: the Ram. It was impossible for me to miss it. The wooden pillar sheathed in copper caught the morning sun as it was dragged onto the platform we'd raised for it, then aimed at the wall before us. Adanna of Smyrna laid a hand on her creation, and for the first heartbeat nothing happened. Or rather nothing visible. It felt, to my senses, as if the entire world was breathing in.

And in the heartbeat that followed, as Light began to shoot out from the sides in wild spurts, the world breathed out.

She was knocked off her feet, as were the two soldiers helping her, and the Ram shot out like an arrow swatted by some unseen titan's hand. The Light roiled, screamed, and as a sudden burst of power came from behind the walls of Keter I felt the Hierophan's name shiver. **Wrest** killed their defence in the egg as the Ram flew, right at the heart of the wall before us. The same one where a Praesi siege tower had crashed into the stone, weakening the wards holding the rampart together. Spinning and screaming, the Ram hit Keter's wall like the very wrath of the Heavens. Light flared, blinding and burning as the Ram fought to pierce into the rampart, and I caught sight of spurts of stone flying like drops of water before I was forced to look away.

Just in time, for the explosion that followed was powerful enough its breath sent tents flying behind us.

Shielding my eye with my palm more by habit than need, I risked a look at the rampart and let out a shocked breath.

"Merciless Gods," I whispered.

The wall had been savaged. Miles of stone had been slagged down to the foundation, the melted remains trickling down the edge of the cliff and into the drop. The streets behind the wall had been ravaged by broken and heated chunks of stone, looking as if a rain of sharpeners had been dropped across them, and though I could see soldiers swarming the sheer amount of damage was staggering. Just as we had hoped, the Blessed Artificer had blown us a path open into Keter. One that would not be the enemy's narrow killing zones on the bridges, nowhere as heavily defended. *And they'll have to keep defending those while we strike here, else we'll punch through.*

A heartbeat later the Dead King collapsed both bridges, but I smiled against the strap of my helmet. We'd been waiting for that: sorcery bloomed, Akua and the Witch keeping the broken bridges aloft and usable. We'd learned from our first defeat. I laughed, unsheathing my sword and raising high, as all around me the Army of Callow cheered loudly enough to echo across the sky. Keter's impregnable wall, reduced in a moment. My soldiers felt fires in their belly again.

"*Begin*," I shouted, and it rippled out.

The melted stone was not yet cooled, but we did not have time to waste. The longer the Dead King got to prepare against our landing, the more brutal securing that beachhead was going to get. Zombie let out a loud cry, wings spreading as I spurred her on to take flight. I glided over the Army of Callow as the First, Third and Fourth brought forward their bridges. They rose up in

their air like poles, carefully aimed to the calculations of the sappers overseeing the effort, and then after a push gravity took its toll. They toppled forward, falling all in a row. Not that Keter was to let us land so easily. Magic bloomed ahead, but those I left to Masego. When I guided Zombie into a glide, staff in hand as I called on Night, it was to meet another threat: the great wyrm that was tearing through houses and streets to get to the breach. The great abomination of bone and leathery skin screeched, but I shouted back.

"Crows take you," I snarled, "and *burn*."

Black fire erupted from the tip of my staff, growing from a trickle to a torrent to a burning river as it struck the massive snake construct in the side. Magic whizzed around me, but none came close: all that would have hit suddenly changed trajectory, Hierophant slapping them away with Wrest. I grit my teeth and kept letting the Night flow through me even as my veins cooled and sweat beaded my brow, Zombie's long wings taking us into a smooth circling glide. I finally killed the working and lowered my staff, just in time to take my mount into a dive as Keter's first ballistas were brought into position and began firing on me.

I got a look at the wyrm first, though, and grinned fiercely: it wouldn't going anywhere.

Even with all the power I'd pumped through I'd only incinerated half of the construct, but it was quite beyond moving. It pissed me off a little that it'd still managed to accomplish part of its' objective – wedge its body between the falling bridges and the ground – but barely a third of our crossings had been blocked with the move.

"Priests will clean up the rest of it," I told Zombie, leaning against her neck. "Come one, we're going with the first wave."

Some brave souls from all three commands in the Army of Callow had begun the daunting work set out before them: crossing the chasm atop the steel bridges. We'd aimed for a wideness of three soldiers to be able to pass through each bridge at a time, for a total of ninety-nine legionaries at a time across all bridges. Much as Juniper would have preferred more, the amount of steel this had taken was already astronomical. Zombie's took us under the bridges, layering stripes of shadow and light against the cliffs surrounding me on both sides, and after passing the last I guided my mount into taking us up. What I saw as I turned to look at our assault gave me pause.

It was a massacre.

My soldiers had made it halfway through the bridges before enemy fire began to fall on them, but now that it had... Arrows and

scorpion bolts shot out in hails, stones from scorpions and streaks of sorcery smashing through shields like they were made of paper. I wasted no time, spurring Zombie back into the fight, and began striking at the enemy – siege engines first, they were hardest to replace. It wasn't going great.

"Fuck," I snarled, dropping low to avoid another curse.

Already a full archer's volley was falling on my position, the impossibly precise coordination between the dead setting up the sequence perfectly. Zombie was already diving but we had to spin to avoid twin ballista bolts – one skidded off the edge of my armour, another took a few feathers off her side – and we were forced to take refuge under the bridges for the second time before flying back up the other side. I'd torched two ballistas and an archer's nest, but the enemy was using its mages to shield against my Night workings. I guided Zombie back up and flew through a hail of arrows, swatting them aside with a burst of Night, and hammered at a ballista jutting out from some half-broken temple. The black flames washed over the shield, but a heartbeat later Hierophant wrested the defence away and I let out a snarl of triumph.

Without Masego covering me, though, the swarm of curses had me forced to drop below again.

I rose on the opposite side for another pass, but when we tried the same trick I found that the flames still didn't go through: the undead mages had layered the shields into two different spells. Fuck. They'd figured out the weakness of the aspect, then. Hierophant could take from more than one source of magic, but that meant splitting focus. On an artefact that was fine, but when there were other wills fighting him? They'd shut down our trick. I had to drop again, a glance telling me that our assault had stalled halfway through the chasm: soldiers were dying too fast to get further.

Another pass, and I went at it differently: I attacked the grounds around the ballista instead, shattering stone with entropy. Mixed results: knocked the ballista down but it wasn't destroyed, and Masego had to cover me from a mass of enemy magic as Zombie dove. On the next pass, the dead got even more clever on us. They began holding back the release of their rituals, letting them loose when I attacked so that Masego was forced to handle them instead of help me. I almost let out a scream of frustration.

"This is going nowhere," I breathed out, forcing myself to calm down.

And it had gotten there, by the looks of it: the bridges were almost clear, the last legionaries still on them try to get off.

Not a single man had gotten to the other side, and my soldiers were no longer trying to pass.

## Chapter 58: Mud

*"Invading Callow is like stepping on a porcupine: do it long enough and it shall be crushed, but one should expect to lose the foot."*

*– First Princess Clarisse Merovins*

Juniper looked like she wanted to bite someone's head off, and it was not impossible she would before the day ended.

"They were already retreating," my marshal admitted. "I called the retreat myself so it would be in order instead of a rout."

So mostly to save face, I thought with a grimace. All attempts to cross the bridges had ceased, a sight that had my stomach clenching in fear and unease. The longer we let the Dead King dig in on the other side, the worse this would get. I thought it pretty telling that no serious attempt had been made to destroy our bridges yet. Sorcery was still traded back and forth, filling the sky with streaks of colour and eerie shrieks, but so far the enemy had not even tried turning their ballistae on our forces this side of the chasm.

"We need to punch through," I bluntly said. "If we don't the battle's good as lost."

The attacks through the last two stone bridges were going to get shredded if we didn't draw enemy forces with our own push and the Praesi had orders not to commit their forces before we had a beachhead inside Keter's walls.

"I *know* that, Catherine," the Hellhound growled. "You think I don't? But I also know that if I give the order it won't be obeyed."

I grit my teeth.

"I know casualties are-"

"We've lost almost two thousand already," Juniper evenly said.

The number gave me pause. Gods. That many?

"It hasn't even been an hour," I numbly said.

"Those bridges are pure murder," the Marshal of Callow replied. "I ordered a push with mages putting up shields and all it did was draw ballista fire. The only saving grace is that the bodies fall instead of block the way."

It obscured how many we'd lost, too. At least to some extent. Men who'd been three companies back when the battle started were going to notice they were now the frontline because everyone in front was dead.

"We need to commit Named," Juniper said. "Can Hierophant cover our advance?"

Still feeling numb, I clumsily undid the clasp of my helmet. My face was covered in sweat and dirt, too-warm locks of hair falling over it when I took off the helm.

"Not without fucking over another front," I said. "If he protects our advance, he's not countering enemy rituals."

I spat to the side, fruitlessly trying to get the taste of iron out of my mouth.

"How's the Blessed Artificer?" I asked.

"Back on her feet, it was just a bump," Juniper said. "You think she can run interference for us?"

"I think she's the only heavy hitter left that's not already committed," I said, "so it's her or no one."

"I'll send for her," Juniper replied, then hesitated.

"Speak your mind," I said.

The tall orc looked uncomfortable.

"It won't be enough to get them to take the bridges again," she said. "Not after the slaughter they just went through."

Brushing sweaty hair off my dead eye – my ponytail was fraying – I turned to the Army of Callow. Juniper's command tent was well situated, overlooking the offensive while boasting both a solid set of wards and room for me to land Zombie. She was still back there, tied to a post. An army, I had thought more than once, was like a large beast. It had a breath to it, lungs and veins and blood. It could be angered or wounded, made brave or craven. And though I did not have it in me to call any of these men and women who had followed me halfway across the world cowards, I watched those shifting ranks and saw the fight had just been beaten out of them.

Twice now every assault on the walls of Keter had failed and now they were asking themselves an ugly question: could they be breached at all?

They weren't sure, not anymore, and in a battle like this that was as bad as thinking it couldn't be done. Once you doubted, the whistle of every arrow was a dirge and the glint on the enemy's

blade as the promise of death. Like a worm in an apple, the doubt was eating my army alive.

"My fault," I quietly said.

Juniper turned to glare at me.

"I don't know what you've gotten in your head but-"

"My fault," I repeated, in a tone that brooked no contradiction. "I've been fighting this battle mounted, Hellhound. That's not what it takes to win a slog like this."

I clenched my armoured fist.

"Blood and mud," I said. "It always comes down to the blood and mud, doesn't it?"

I pulled my helmet back down on my head. Juniper glared at me.

"Recklessness won't bring us victory," she said.

I secured the clasp, pulled at it to make sure it'd stay in place. The gesture was familiar, almost comforting. How many times had I done this before? Gods, how long had I begun to? I smiled at her, unable to help it.

"Do you remember the first war game we ever had, you and I?" I asked.

She snorted.

"Ratface and I had a war game," Juniper corrected. "You were just some bum with a sword that took command after I beat him."

My smile widened into a grin.

"I still remember how godawful furious you were, when I used my Name to leap over that log trap," I said. "You snarled 'what the Hells was that?' and-"

"And you replied: 'me, winning'," Juniper finished, almost smiling. "I remember."

I looked at the broken walls of the Crown of the Dead, the empire of horrors that still awaited beyond it.

"Come a long way, haven't we?" I softly said.

"All the way to the end of the world," the Hellhound replied, baring her fangs.

She had that look in her eye that'd made me want her from the start, even when we'd just been kids playing at war in the



Tower's shadow. The one that was all flint and iron, that said the soul behind it would rather snap than bend. I raised my arm, offered it, and after a heartbeat of hesitation she took it. An old legionary's salute.

"The army's yours," I said. "You know the plans."

Her face tightened, emotions flickering across it too quickly for me to read. Her grip tightened around my arm.

"It's a fool thing, what you do," Juniper of the Red Shields said, voice hoarse. "It's a damned fool thing, and I can't even shout at you for it."

She released my arm as if the armour had burned it.

"Warlord," Juniper said.

My staff I raised, then slammed it down. Though it was only dead yew and beneath it was stone, it parted for the wood like water. It was stuck in the stone and would stay there until I took it up again.

"Hellhound," I replied.

And without another word, I went down into the crowd. Into the ranks. My eye wandered, looking for something, and found it. A boy, about my height, and as I opened my mouth I recognized with a start that I knew him.

"Edgar, isn't it?"

"Ma'am, yes," the boy – no, it'd been years, the young man now – hastily saluted. "And I'm a sergeant now, ma'am."

"So I see," I replied, glancing at the stripes.

He swelled at the words.

"I need another favour of you, Sergeant Edgar," I said. "I must borrow a shield."

He did not hesitate, I saw with something that was neither quite pride nor grief, for a moment. Without batting an eye he offered it, even helping me slide in my arm.

"Won't do no good on your monster crow, though," Sergeant Edgar noted. "It's a footman's shield, ma'am."

"Then it's exactly what I need," I replied.

He paused, and others did around us. Neither of us were trying to stay quiet, and the press of soldiers was close. Murmurs rippled out.

"Get another before you go in," I said, clapping his shoulder with affection. "Fortune be with you, Sergeant Edgar."

"Hells," the young man grinned, "that'd be a first."

Hard, satisfied laughter followed. I let it carry me forward. One limping step after another, I crossed the sea of legionaries. Eyes followed me as if I were a falling star, hands reaching out shyly to touch my shield or the hem of my cloak as I passed. And I felt it move with me. Something like a shiver, a physical tremor going through the great beast that was my army. I was there, among them. Word of it passed from lip to ear, moving so quickly that before long the soldiers ahead me were already looking my way. I did not hurry my limp, because hurrying would do no good. When I reached the edge of the camp, the edge of the cliff, when I rose the steps to the beginning of the bridge and turned, I found a sea of faces awaiting me.

Above us a clouded, hellish sky lit up with the eerie lights of war sorcery. The distant eruptions of power were like a broken breeze, just enough to have the banners moving. First Army. Fourth Army. And, standing before me, the Third. The vanguard of my every victory, which I had named Dauntless for that unflinching bravery.

"I won't lie to you," I told them, Name strengthening my voice for all to hear. "There's death ahead."

None were surprised. They had seen too many of their friends killed to be.

"They'll come for us with fire and storm," I said. "With every horrible trick they've been waiting to unleash. The moment it looks like we might win, they'll unleash the Hells until the broken gates are left swinging in the wind."

I breathed out.

"And still I ask it of you," I said. "To march. To bleed. To die, until we've crossed the deep and rammed death back down the Dead King's throat."

There were no cheers at that. It was not a boast I'd offered them, something to laugh about. They all knew what it would cost to get there.

"I won't blame you if you run," I told them, "even though there's nowhere left to run. We're all a long way from home."

I looked at them, and I saw in their eyes that they did not want to fight. They loved me, I thought, but still they did not want to fight.

"But if we don't win here we'll bring down the world with us," I said, "so I'll be crossing that bridge."

Murmurs bloomed, low and urgent. The shield on my arm was hard to miss.

"And I know it's more than a queen can ask," I called out, "but I ask it anyway."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched.

"You trusted me through Dormer and the Camps, through Maillac's Boot and Four Armies," I said, "through Arcadia and the Wasteland and every misbegotten bit a land a soldier's ever died on."

Gods, where had I not dragged them? They had even bled beyond Creation, as if Calernia was too small a field for them to die on.

"Trust me once more," I asked. "Follow me into the breach, through dark and ruin until we come out on the other side."

Maybe one day they'd call me a soldier queen, but the truth of it was simpler: I was queen of soldiers. I'd spent more time in the saddle than on my throne, pawning off the intricacies of rules to one regent after another as I went off to scatter Callow's enemies. They might have crowned me in Laure, anointed me and said the words, but my real kingdom stood before me: banners and steel.

The Army of Callow.

"You and I against the rest of the fucking world, one last time."

In the distance lightning crackles, exploded in a burst of light, and as ash fell from the sky like rain I stood before a sea of soldiers that would not look me in the eye. Silence hung in the air like pestilence, and the longer it lasted the harder my stomach clenched. It would not be broken, I realized. They would not gather their courage, raise the banners and follow me again. All my life I had wondered – feared, hoped for – the moment where I would finally ask too much of my soldiers. When they would at last balk, hold back the loyalty that had kept me on my feet long before I'd begun using a staff. So here it was, I thought, at long last. *You lasted until the end*, I thought, looking at them. *There is no shame in this.*

But I had a duty, and I had sworn an oath: whether they be gods or kings or all the armies of Creation. So I unsheathed my sword, slowly, and raised it to them in a salute.

"Be proud," I told them, meaning every word. "You reached the edge of the world."

And I turned my back to them. One limping step down the bridge after another, the steel clanging against my boots. Three, five, ten. In the distance a pair of ballistae were aimed, and I saw the flicker of movement. Gritting my teeth, I pulled on Night and let it loose through my veins. I slashed at the air, darkness trailing in my sword's wake as a streak of Night slapped aside the stones that would have torn right through my body. I squared my shield, straightened my back and began moving again. Simple, I thought, I just had to keep it simple. There was only the enemy ahead, nothing else in all of Creation.

One more step. Always one more step, until I made it all the way to the other side.

"DAUNTLESS!"

My steps stuttered, but I could not let myself be distracted. Far ahead, a nest of mages loosed in my direction a ritual that was as a crawling wave of grey. I pulled on Night again, smashing a pillar of pure black into the spell and twisting my will. The working sucked in the magic before detonating, breaking the spell formula with it.

"DAUNTLESS!"

The shout came again, and this time more voices picked it up. I limped forward, shield up, as the world narrowed in front of me. I walked a span of steel three men wide, without railings or anything that would stop a single misstep from seeing you fall to your death. Lines of it stretched to my right and left, like teeth cutting at the void below us. Sorcery bloomed ahead, cabals of mages that were little more than bones and burning green sorcery shaping mounds of curses or frost. Gods, the numbers were overwhelming and I hadn't even reached arrow range yet.

"Sve Noc," I prayed in Crepuscular. "My enemies are many and their wrath is great: grant me ruin, that I may deal it out to them in your name."

I twitched, Night bubbling up my veins, and let out a hoarse shout as shadows ripped themselves out of my back, fleeing the cover of my cloaks in flocks. Crows that were as shards of darkness took flight by the hundreds, spreading out in a wave that flew heedless into the enemy's sorcery. My lip tasted of blood and I wiped it with the back of my gauntlet, spitting the rest into the chasm. One more step, I reminded myself. In the distance, the crows plunged into the spells and faded like morning mist – tainting every spell they touched, eating away at them from the inside. How many more of those did I have in me? Enough, I told myself. I would have enough.

My fingers were slick with sweat, my aketon soaked under the plate. Flakes of ash stuck to my face, to the wet cloth covering

my dead eye, but still I advanced. My bad leg burned, throbbed with every step, but the pain was an old friend.

The ballistae had been silent, and now I saw why: they had been repositioned, awaiting the moment to fire a full volley. Only it wasn't on me that the stones and bolts were fired. The machines spat out death at my bridge, but at others too. And I could not resist the glance, even knowing it would shatter my calm. Behind me, the Third Army's banner flew in the wind and legionaries advanced. Tight ranks, shields up and faces grim. But they had come, marching down the lines of steel that were as a road straight to death, and my heart clenched at the sight of it. Always the Third, dauntless to the end. I would not let that trust go betrayed.

I thrust up my sword, Night already welling up inside me.

"I bring the word of the two-faced goddess," I said.

Night swirled above me, sweeping up into the sky as a raging wind, and like a blade piercing the Heavens my working pierced the clouds. Arm trembling from the effort, I pulled down my sword and the rest of the sky with it.

"And that word is **no**," I hissed.

Wind and clouds raged, a river drawn across the bridges like a stroke of paint, and the projectiles were swallowed whole. I released the working, panting as shivers of exhaustion went down my spine. I'd ripped a hole in the clouds, and through it the light of day shone. The sunlight found the rain of ashes, bathing in pale, and I might almost have thought it was snowing. In the distance I heard hoarse cheers, but there was a closer noise. Boots on steel. Legionaries catching up to me. And with them, on the too-warm wind, came one last sound drifting up to my ears.

"The knights will get the glory

The king will keep his throne."

I was not sure whether to laugh or weep, so instead I kept my eyes ahead. One more step, I swore, and limped forward.

"We won't be in the story

Our names will not be known."

Sorcery swelled ahead, but the sky screamed out and streaks of pale lightning struck down at the enemy mages. No, not lightning – Light. The Blessed Artificer had come out to fight. Cheers sounded again. One more step, I prayed, and through the raining ash advanced.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud-"

"It's us who holds the line," I whispered.

One more step and all the Hells opened: arrow range. I was halfway through. They had massed archers and crossbowmen while we waited, crammed every skeleton upright and able to aim in thick lines covering every bit of stone they had to spare. They released all at once, with impossibly perfect timing, and death flew out in a swarm. I pulled deep on Night, blade wreathed in darkness, and slashed away. Behind us a great javelin of Light flew out, and as captains screamed out orders the Army of Callow loosed a wave of massed fireballs.

It wasn't enough.

I hacked away at the arrows in front of us, even covering the bridges to my sides, but others flew in arcs above and there were simply too *many* to cover. Steel punctured shields, ripped into flesh, toppled soldiers screaming into the void.

"The Princes take the Vales

The Tyrant is at the Gate

Our crops wither and fail,

The enemy's host is great."

The line wavered, I could feel it buckling. But I kept advancing so they did too – voices rising defiantly to add to the song. The storm of arrows was not the danger of a single breath. It was a doom in three beats, as again and again the enemy went through the same movements: nock, pull, loose. The dead did not tire or hesitate, only missing a shot when a string strapped and needed to be replaced. And so death came for us in waves, relentless. A shot skittered off the side of my shield, another grazed my cheek and I could barely move quickly enough to gather Night to me.

"Mages, forward," went up the cry, and soon shields bloomed in front of us, but like before they attracted attention.

Ballistae concentrated fire on the visible targets that were the translucent panes of magic, shattering them were arrows failed. The line was buckling again, and even for me to take a single step forward was like wading against a river's current. We were failing again. I was already tired, more than I should be, but what point is there in hoarding power when we were about to lose? I took a step forward, almost swallowing my tongue for the burning pain of my leg, and clumsily ripped at the straps keeping my shield on my arm. Arrows fell, but I had a guardian of my own:

a ball of blue flame formed in front of me, spinning and expanding to swallow all the projectiles before it burned out. Masego was protecting me

Then it was on me to protect everyone else.

I threw away the shield, hearing it rattle against the edge of the bridge and vanish into the dark, and I breathed out deeply. In and out, steady. Seizing too much Night when I was exhausted could make me throw up otherwise.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud

It's us who holds the line."

I dug deep. Until my breath came out mist for the cold inside my veins, until light began to hurt my eyes and I could hear my heart beating like a drum against my ears. I'd done many a powerful working of Night, in my time, but this one would be different. It was not the First Under the Night walking down that bridge, the highest priestess of Night. I was the Warden, come to bring order to the madness, and so it was not black flame or curses I was calling on. Keter thought to cowing me by unleashing one monster after another, by sowing a field of death.

But I'd brought my own, made of every death I owned.

"Rise," I snarled, hand pulling up, and for a moment there was nothing at all.

Then the shadows beneath the bridges, the dark nestled beneath the cliffs, began to boil over. Strands of darkness shot out, thick tendrils of Night, and they gathered like a river to the sea. Above my head a shape began to form, and though Keter unleashed storms of sorcery to shatter it the Hierophant allowed not a speck of magic to pass. Watching it was seeing an artist at work: curses turned into flame, which burned acid into smoke, which coiled into tendrils choking out green light. A single will cascaded down a line of spells, breaking them with the same exquisite grace of a duellist's perfect killing stroke. Again and again, the man who had once been the Apprentice got the best of them. And with every moment he bought me, every ballista the Blessed Artificer shattered in a burst of Light, the shape above me grew. Swelled, until it stood so tall it blocked out the sun.

A river of arrows was fired into the dark, disappearing as if they'd been dropped in a well.

And when the storms of sorcery broke, the smoke scattered and the ash-wind broke, facing the enemy was a behemoth of a monster. Mine, my Beast. It was shaped as a wolf would be, if shadows cast on a wall by a scared child: too sinuous, its impossible large maw bristling with teeth. It was my old companion, the breath of the back of my neck and the laughter in my ear. The monster I'd built out of a hundred thousand corpses, sown across battlefields from the east to the west. I'd built on my throne atop a mountain of dead soldiers but today, just this once, the throne would give back. Monstrous maw opening wide, the great beast of Night breathed in the air of Creation like it was savouring it. Behind me my men had halted, but I turned back and offered them a wild grin.

"FORWARD," I shouted. "FORWARD AND FOLLOW ME!"

The Beast began to laugh, and Gods though it was a terrible the terror was on our side. I limped forward, breaking into a pained run, and ahead of me the monster charged.

"Man the walls," my legionaries sang as they followed, "bare the steel."

Sorcery screamed, ballistae fired and a howling volley of arrows disappeared into the Beast's body. I quickened my steps, a hoarse shout ripping itself clear of my lungs – as much pain as glee.

"Hoist the banner, raise the shield."

The Beast tumbled into the enemy, crushing undead with every step and laughing as it swallowed whole a siege engine. We ran, ran as fast as we could, knowing that the opportunity would not knock twice. Two thirds through, and then more. We were so close.

"A free death they cannot steal."

Rituals bloomed again, and enemy archers began took aim at us again instead of wasting their arrows on my monster – which was tearing them apart with tooth and claw, ravaging their tightly packed lines. Steel broadheads began to fall on us again, taking blood and lives, but the run had taken on momentum. It did not slow even when bodies began to drop.

"When we meet them on the field."

I felt Masego try to West the enemy's rituals but there were just too many. Great thorns of sickly green magic were shot in the Beast's belly, and though it screamed and clawed at all around it I could feel something hollowing out my working from the inside. I was not the only one on the field who knew how to make use of ruin. The Beast began to fall apart piece by piece, howling and clawing at the enemy as it did, and as my boots hit the bridge



the heart of it faded into mist. A heartbeat later I took another step, and instead of steel I touched stone.

I had crossed, and my army was mere feet behind me.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud

It's us who holds the line."

And as the song died, the Army of Callow followed me into dark and ruin. I laughed and slammed into a skeleton, cutting through bow and string and neck. It collapsed like a stringless puppet. The enemy had been waiting for us, but we'd caught them flatfooted and the Beast had put them in disarray. They'd not had time to redeploy, so as I tore into a line of archers sword in hand I felt the heavies of the Third Army crack those lines like an egg. Heeding unseen orders the skeletons tried to retreat, scampering up slopes and through broken houses, but we swept through them like a tide.

"Mages," I shouted, parrying a blow and returning a vicious riposte.

The skeleton's head broke under the pommel, shattering clean and killing it.

"Mages, fire on the ballistae," I shouted again.

They obeyed and fire burned bright, the enemy's engines finally silenced. A wave of steel swelled behind me and we smashed our way through archers and crossbowmen until there were none left to smash. Behind there were proper fighters, skeletons in armour with swords and axes and shields, but even charging uphill the momentum was with us. We'd break through, past this breach and into Keter. That was why I could already feel the coming, I thought. The Scourges. But it wouldn't matter, not a whit, because we weren't done either. As Keter mustered its horrors and my men drove back the dead, pushing forth the beachhead, long shadows fell on us all. Between us and the sun flew great fortresses, bristling with soldiers and mages.

The last gasps of the Dread Empire of Praes had come to make war.

## Chapter 59: Steel

*"War is the greatest of alchemies. It takes men as can be found in any town in the world and makes them into heroes and monsters."*

*– Extract from the prologue of the first volume of the  
“Annals of the League of Free Cities”, by famed  
historian Shapash the Ashuran*

The skeleton was decked in bronze, the scales of the armour pristine and the strange horned helmet it sported was freshly polished – as well as open faced. I closed the distance so the swing of its axe would pass behind me, rasping down the Mantle of Woe without even cutting cloth, and smashed the pommel of my sword into the skull. One blow shattered the jaw, a second the nose and the third ripped the head right off the spine.

“Form up,” I shouted. “Seventh Company, do I need to gently hold your fucking hand before you put those shields locked?”

“Yes please,” a woman’s voice shouted back.

I snorted, getting a glimpse of a tall Soninke flashing pale teeth at me before her lieutenant slapped the back of her helm. The seventh company heeded my order, though, echoed as it was by the shouts of a dozen angry sergeants. With the seventh, the twelfth and the fourth forming up on our left flank we should be good to push further up. Their shield walls blocked the streets on that side, though at the moment they didn’t have anyone to face down. My hand was still smoking from my last use of Night collapsing a row of the houses between those streets, helped along by every mage we could scrape together. We’d wanted to leave them up, use them to keep the dead herded when they showed up, but it’d been too much of a risk.

After the fourth time a supposedly clear house was revealed to have had ghouls hidden somewhere in it that then leapt from the roof straight at a mage to die tearing the throat out, I’d decided to stay on the safe side. The houses had been almost absurdly easy to bring down, we’d found, which had the back of my neck pricking. That did not strike me as an accident. Satisfied with the seventh company’s formation, I tore my gaze away from them and turned to the tall orc lieutenant that’d been waiting patiently on me as I shouted.

“I’m listening,” I said.

“Ma’am,” he began, “we-”

He was interrupted by a horrific scream as a hellish burst of red light bled all over the clouds above us, a distorted ring of magic burning with runes flickering open a dozen blocks ahead of us. A misshapen horror dropped through, too-small wings looking like rotted bone slowing the descent of a creature with distended scaled belly with too-long arms ending in massive claws. The horror dropped down out of sight, still letting out those soul-rending shrieks. The lieutenant drily swallowed. I clapped his shoulder.

"Cheer up, lieutenant," I said. "Sure, that was one of the foulest abominations either of us has ever seen but for once the damned fucking thing's on our side."

The flying fortress hovering above that part of the city, raining down spells and stones, made that pretty clear. The Praesi were tossing devils into the mess ahead of my army like a fool trying to buy a wish at a fountain, which was both encouraging and not: much as I was happy they were softening up the opposition, I did have to wonder how bad it must be for this to be the seventh time they were burning a greater devil contract.

"Hungry Gods," the orc got out, "I guess that's something to be thankful for. Fuck of a day if-"

His face turned anguished, pulling a fresh cut on the side of his nose, when he realized who he'd just been cursing with.

"-ma'am," he hastily added, then saluted for good measure. "The front is stalling, ma'am, Commander Spitter requests that you come help break the stalemate."

I nodded.

"Tell him I'm on my way," I said. "The flanks are set up, we need to begin pushing into the city."

The avenue we so badly needed to get to was straight ahead, by memory, and I'd spent so many hours looking at maps of Keter that I could see the layout of the city when I closed my eyes.

It had been millennia since the fall of Sephirah and the living ceased to stay within the walls – save for a few hundred servants deep in the heart of the city – but though the Dead King had had worked his horror on all that lay within the walls there were still traces of the city that once was. I'd seen in the Arcadian echoes that Keter had been raised on a pair of hills by a river, and though the water was long gone the city still echoed of it. The Crown of the Dead was built upwards, the bottom of it beginning at the foot of its forty-yards high walls and rolling up to the raised plateau where the two hills had once stood.

There the five palaces of Keter awaited us, and the Hellgate whose taking would be our victory.

The inside of the city was a maze whose layout changed according to the Dead King's whims, streets and 'houses' – most of them empty, used only to store the dead and their arms away from weather so they would not rust and decay – raised and demolished according to arcane designs, but a handful of parts had remained unmoving through all the crusades. Most important of them was a set of six large avenues crisscrossing the city, the largest of which went through north to south and had been built over the

now-dry riverbed of the river that had attracted people to live here long ago. For our push into the city to have a change of getting anywhere, we needed to get onto one of those avenues.

The rest of Keter was a playground of death, and though those avenues were sure to be trapped and heavily defended at the end of the day they were the one part of the city that Neshamah couldn't actually destroy while defending his capital: he needed the damned avenues to move his soldiers around. He could use the smaller streets, sure, but them being a maze was a double-edged sword and they also happened to be *narrow*. Meaning not a lot of soldiers could squeeze through and given that the Dead King's great advantage was numbers that was a harsh handicap when tangling with the Army of Callow. We'd earned our reputation as the finest foot on Calernia the hard way.

Soldiers were milling about in a semblance of good order, lines and companies shifting to anchor our flanks or press at the front while we expanded on all sides to make room for the troops continuing to cross. I winced as I saw a ballista bolt from somewhere to the northwest scythe through a few of my soldiers, killing or toppling them to a more horrible death. Neshamah was beginning to move siege engines in position at the top of the still-standing walls on both our flanks, which was going to be a problem. We'd either need to take the walls to silence them, spreading out further than I'd like, or keep our mages lines focused on the defence until the soldiers had crossed. *Juniper's problem*, I reminded myself. She'd figure something out. I shook myself out of the thoughts and followed a line of regulars towards the front, through melted stone gone cool and buildings shredded by the Ram.

Beyond the grounds glassed by the Light the shattered buildings rose into a ragged slope of collapsed walls and loose stones, which we climbed in haste as arrows fell in sparse rain from a long distance. Arcing shots, likely fired blindly from behind enemy lines at a place they knew would force us to lower shields for balance. Let it not be said that the Dead King's commanders were unskilled, however empty and brutally efficient a kind of skill it might be. Climbing down the slope onto a paved street, I saw exactly what Commander Spitter had needed me for. After crossing the bridges we'd swept through the enemy defences and then another three city blocks beyond that as the dead tried to put together a shield wall to check our advance, but it'd not been enough.

Keter had recovered from the surprise two blocks further in, though. A barricade was encircling our position, as I blinked in astonishment at the sight of it – it'd not existed a quarter hour ago – I realized exactly why those houses on our flanks had been so easy to collapse.

"*Shit*," I muttered.

Keter was possible to fortify in a way that no other city in the world was, when it came down to it. Even the great fortresses of Calernia had to make concessions to habitability, but what did the Crown of the Dead care for that? There were no living souls within the walls and so the city made solely to be held against invaders, massive armies led by heroes. And though we'd avoided the worst of the defences by collapsing a wall instead of taking one of the gates, we'd known that was not a state of affairs that was going to last. Nor had it. That impossible barricade that had encircled our vanguard, leaving only one way through in a narrow street, had not been assembled – it had been *collapsed*. Undead had smashed the houses, collapsing them in a way that blocked streets as well.

I threw up an eye of Night as high as I could and cursed again at what I saw. Like industrious ants, skeletons were going around collapsing houses all around our beachhead to encircle it in a loose ring. And where a later of barricade had already been made, they went about adding a second. *They're hemming us in*, I thought. *If we don't break through quick enough, they'll just bottle us here and shoot us like fish in a barrel*. And like all the finest trap did, they'd left us with a visible way out so we'd commit: that narrow street in front of our vanguard, packed so tightly with undead they could barely move. A funnel for us to charge down and die in. I began elbowing my way forward, though after the first few times my soldiers saw who I was and parted their ranks instead.

"Shield wall," I shouted. "Get those fucking shields up before you all get shot!"

Officers echoed me across the army, our lines grown ragged from the breakthrough steady just as the first undead crossbows and javelinmen began lining up atop the barricade. We'd taken the Dead King aback with our charge, but now he'd forcefully stabilized his line with the collapsed houses and he was setting up another killing field: if those barricades weren't about to be sprouting a forest's worth of range troops, I'd eat my crown. I particularly did not like the look of the javelins: those went right through shields and plate when thrown right, which the skeletons were sure to. It wasn't the thought that we couldn't smash our way through that had me worried, mind you. We could and goddamn would. It was the other ninety times we'd have to do it before we got anywhere near a victory. Was the Dead King already ordering a second ring of barricades to be collapsed around us, or was he going to wait a bit more?

Either way, I grimly thought, the only way we weren't going to be drowned in street-by-street fighting was by moving too quickly for him to be able to keep us bottled up. And the only way for

that was to break through another fourteen blocks straight ahead, to reach one of the five central avenues of Keter. I knew better than to think every step in direction wasn't going to sprout a fresh nightmare in need of putting down. Thankfully, I was due the presence of some people who knew a thing or two about doing that. I swung my sword at a knot of skeleton crossbowmen, blowing them off the rampart as air exploded in front of them, and ran a hand down the chord of a story. One was almost there.

I felt out the outcome a heartbeat before the sequence of it could begin, and immediately pulled on Night. A large beorn came into sight, having climbed a large tower to the east, and after a roar it leapt. I could see the trajectory before it had even begun to move. A smooth arc down, straight into the company of heavies from the Third that was hammering at the enemy shield wall trying to keep us pinned in the avenue. And it might have landed, if not for the silhouette that ran up a half-collapsed house without breaking stride before leaping up, shining with blindingly bright Light. I caught a glimpse of a greatsword being swung as the beorn was carved through from head to toe and somewhere behind me I felt the twin shiver of an aspect being used and magic blooming: a gale of wind caught the halves of the beorn and the roiling skeletons within, tossing them back into the enemy ranks.

A heartbeat later the Blade of Mercy landed on his feet and the Rogue Sorcerer ended his spell. A heartbeat after that, what looked like a horse-sized worm made entirely out of muscles and fingerbones popped out from behind a tower to the west and spat a cloud of poison at that same company of heavies.

Fear, relief, horror returned. The Dead King's favourite play.

"None of that," I said, clicking my tongue, and released the Night.

A spinning sphere swallowed the cloud before contracting and exploding into a ball of poisonous flame, which a flick of my wrist sent right back at the bloody horror. It slithered into the tower for cover but not quite quick enough, its bottom half incinerated as the roof of the building collapsed atop it. Since Roland and the Blade of Mercy were here, she should be somewhere – I frowned, then turned around and hit the space right behind me with the flat of my sword. The Painted Knife let out a yelp, cold steel slapping her cheek, and I spared a glare as she backpedalled.

"How many times am I going to have to tell you you're not bloody invisible, Kallia?" I said.

"At least you didn't drop me down a tower this time," the Painted Knife reproachfully replied.

"Day's young," I grunted, "and if you keep trying to sneak up on me during battle I might reconsider."

I was completely serious, which the heroine seemed to pick up on.

"I hear your words, Black Queen," she assured me.

I hummed, entirely unconvinced. I was pretty sure this had turned into one of those headache-inducing Levant honour things for her, which meant I was going to have to keep breaking her legs until she decided not even the bragging rights were worth that amount of pain.

"Your last two?" I asked.

"They should be-"

There was a great cracking sound to my left and I immediately turned, eye going straight to the unusual sight of someone single-handedly smashing their way through a barricade that was almost entirely stone with little more than a war hammer. A woman in bright red plate – Gods, the sight of it had every inch of me offended, that was just *asking* to get shot – with a helmet forged to look like a grinning devil and weapons strapped on her back was pulverising chunks of stone with every swing. And though she was almost seven feet tall and broad as a barn door, it wasn't muscles alone that let the Red Knight shatter stone like it was overripe cantaloupes.

She wasn't good at much aside from breaking shit, but that much she was *really* good at.

The villainess might still have taken a few javelins in the neck for her troubles courtesy of the undead above, though, if not for the fact that they were currently occupied with an enthusiastically murderous wolf the size of a small barn. Where the Hells the Skinchanger had actually found a wolf that large in Lycaonese lands was a mystery to me, much less killed and skinned it for use, but I wasn't going to argue with the shapes the woman had chosen to take up: they were a pretty repertoire of clawed and fanged nightmares, even the fucking birds. I didn't know why the eagle-thing she sometimes turned into had horns, of all things, but apparently they were both amour-piercing and poisonous so why the Hells not?

A someone who had ridden a flying horse for several years, I had a healthy appreciation for aerial impalements.

"There," I completed for the Painted Knife. "So I see."

She looked faintly embarrassed. So she hadn't actually ordered the Red Knight to make that breach, huh. I sympathized. Even I found the villainess difficult to deal with, and unlike Kallia my

authority was bolstered by the fact that I'd once brought down a four-story tower on the Red Knight's head just to make a point. Hadn't actually done much to her, which was why to this day I was pretty sure to kill her I'd need a pool of acid of some sort. Fortunately, she was so infuriatingly terrible a person I was also pretty sure I could get the Concocter to brew said acid for free.

"A second breach will hasten our advance," I continued. "But you need to get your band ready after we punch through."

A steady stare met mine.

"The Scourges are coming," the Painted Knife said.

"At least one," I agreed. "And it'll be coming with lesser Revenants to use as meat shields."

The Dead King wasn't going to commit his finest remaining blades to fights to the – second – death so early in the battle, but he'd be looking to pick up a few kills among our Named if he could. Thin the herd, so to speak, and throw Revenant bodies in the way to get his Scourges out if we got too close to taking a scalp. I had every intention of snuffing out one of his last heavy hitters if the occasion arose, mind you, and Hanno should be fighting at one of the gates with the same intention. The trouble, we both knew, was that invaders past a certain point there was no choice but to fight on the Hidden Horror's terms.

Not something that tended to go well for us, as a rule.

"We will be ready," the Painted Knife swore, then hesitated.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Might you keep the Rogue Sorcerer by your side?" she asked. "Skilled as he is, we move quicker without him and he is most useful from the back."

"I'll drag him along," I agreed.

Roland was one of those eminently reasonable mages that actually wore armour, so I had no issue bringing him into a battlefield. Besides, for a spellcaster the Alamans was actually ridiculously difficult to kill: the amount of protective artifacts he wore on him at all times was impressive paranoid even by Wasteland standards.

"Good hunting," I said, offering my arm.

"And you, Warden," the Painted Knife replied, clasping it.

I waited for Roland, and gentlemen that he was he didn't make it long. Some part of me was always surprised that the Rogue



Sorcerer wasn't taller, I thought. It must have been the long leather coat over the chain mail, covered with pockets full of artefacts. Though the dark-haired man usually went without a helmet, this once he'd made an exception and put on a plait bassinet that pressed his curls against his head. He had a short wand painted blue in hand, which to my senses reeked of the fae. Huh, I'd never seen him with that one before.

"Catherine," he greeted me, glancing at the melee ahead. "I'm grieved we only came so late."

"Named wouldn't have been useful on the bridges," I admitted. "It would have been handing Revenants to the opposition."

Not entirely true, but the few Named that would have made a difference had been needed elsewhere. I was already here, after all, and insisting the Army of Callow should also have the services of the Witch of the Woods on top of mine would have been a hard sell.

"Then we'll make up for the absence it now," Roland firmly said. "Where do you need me?"

I couldn't help but smile. He'd been one of the first heroes to grow on me for a reason.

"You're with me," I said, "and we're going into the thick of it."

"Ah, certain death," he drily replied. "How I missed working with you, Warden."

"Don't be so gloomy," I chided. "It's only *mostly* certain death."

"That would be our finest odds in quite a while, then," he snorted.

He gallantly offered me his arm to walk, which was a nice thought but still got him elbowed in the ribs. It was a battlefield, not a garden stroll. *Alamans*, Merciless Gods. Even at the bloody end of the world. The closest we got to the front, the harder it got to move: the press of soldiers tightened, kept on tightening until it squeezed into the sole street that had been the sole way out of the barricades. Now there was another opening, I thought, but the pressure would not be relieved for some time yet. Maybe thirty feet ahead of us I saw the shield walls hammering at each other, the dead packed tight as my heavies tried to break through them. I leaned closer to Roland.

"Can you clear that?" I asked, gesturing in the melee's direction.

"Given time to cast," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Why?"

"Because unless I'm mistaken," I murmured, "we're about to ambushed. I need you to draw attention."

He sent me a pained look. I stared back, unmoved, until he conceded with a sigh.

"Bait it is," Roland said. "Is Kallia near?"

I nodded. The Painted Knife, for all that her team had some rather straightforward brawlers, was still an assassin at heart. She was waiting too. The Rogue Sorcerer rolled his shoulder.

"Then let's get to it," the hero said.

I took a step back, pulling on Night, and let it fall over me like a veil. I tore out a sliver and shaped it into an eye, tossing it up in the sky, and as I closed my eye of flesh I saw through the other. The Red Knight's breach had let the companies there turn the tables. Climbing through the mess was hard and there were corpses all over the slope, but now my legionaries had climbed atop the barricade and were tearing into the crossbowmen and javelineers. Ahead of me I looked past the brutal melee in the street, seeing how skeletons were pouring in from all adjoining streets to pack this one so tight they could barely move. Yet it was the houses I looked at closest, the tiled stone roofs. I couldn't see a Revenant yet, but that hardly meant there were none.

Ahead of me, the Rogue Sorcerer let out a hoarse shout and pointed an ornate casting rod at the sky: flames poured out like a flock of birds, bright and of many colours.

I could not spare a longer look than that, because the enemy were moving. Three Revenants on a rooftop that'd been empty until an arrow went flying – my heart clenched for a moment but the archer was in bright green leathers, so not the Hawk – and an illusion broke. I kept my eye on them even as what must be a mage Revenant, given that otherwise the swirling colours of those robes would be some sort of a crime, raised an ornate golden staff and pulled an illusion on them again. I'd had a heartbeat to look at the third, finding good plate and a large shield that did not belong to any of the Scourge. Whichever was there they were still lying in wait, so I held back as well.

Around me soldiers began to press forward, parting around my position without knowing why, and I made a note that whatever it was Roland had used it had seemingly worked.

The three Revenants were under illusion again but now that I knew what to look for I could taste the subtle power in the air and follow their position. The Painted Knife's band went about it another way: a heartbeat later a hawk dropped down on the rooftop, turning into a large hound as it landed, and immediately

began sniffing the air. Knowing their position was blown, the Revenants engaged: the illusion went down, an arrow was loosed at the Skinchanger – which she turned into a bear to shrug off – and the sword and board undead doubled back to attack our scout Named. A tactical mistake, I thought as the Painted Knife appeared behind their mage and hacked through the hand holding the staff. A heartbeat later the Blade of Mercy was there as well, landing in a flash of Light that tore a hole through the roof and forced him to roll forward so he wouldn't drop through.

It wasn't a done deal, I thought as I watched them. The mage Revenant's hand kept wielding the staff even when cut off and the Blade of Mercy backed off in surprise when the sword and board undead took on his greatsword without batting an eye, but the band of Named had the advantage. Which meant we were soon due... Darkness fell over the roof and I cursed. I'd been too much to hope that being buried under most of Hainaut had been enough to kill off the Mantle, I supposed. At least I got to find out where she was, which happened to be a rooftop far to my left. Standing besides what had to be the sloppiest Revenant I'd ever seen: barely more than ragged skin and bones, with floppy hair and loose farmers' clothes. Not a weapon in sight and he looked pretty confused.

He couldn't have been more obviously dangerous if the word had been branded on his fucking forehead.

"All right," I grunted. "My turn."

The setup ought to work. I released the Night hiding me and shaped it into solid shadows instead, coiling around me and then exploding outwards in tendrils that I used like great legs. Shouts of surprise came from my legionaries below as I stepped over them and over the barricade, skeletons hacking away at the shadow limbs harmlessly. A streak of magic whizzed my way but I adjusted my position absent-mindedly to let it go wide, eye still on the Mantle. She pointed her great steel mace towards me, her armoured silhouette cast in the half-light allow through by the clouds, and the world shivered from the strength of the curse that shot out. She had, unfortunately for her, fallen prey to the story I'd prepared.

A woman decked in red steel leapt up in the way of the curse, laughing, and the world shivered again.

*I'm not the fifth in their band, I thought, you struck too early.* I smiled down at the Scourge even as I guided myself to land on the rooftop closest to the Mantle's. The Red Knight joined me up there, her armour glimmering deeper red from the curse she had been able to **Devour**. She spat to the side, reaching at her back and taking up a broadsword.

"Weak," the Red Knight sneered. "Your hatred is *weak*. I'll show you what a real Named is like, you petty armoured bitch."

I rolled my shoulder, limping up to her side as the Mantle pivoted to face us and the Revenant at her side looked at us with befuddlement. I reached out with my Name, tried to get a read on what he could do, but all I got was a vague sense of bad luck. And yet I smiled, as I felt a ripple behind me and to our side the Mantle's darkness suddenly vanished. Roland's **Confiscate** worked on the Mantle's curses, then. Good to know.

"Keep her busy," I told the Red Knight, preparing to leap to the other roof. "But don't take risks. We can afford to wait until the others are-"

Instinct pulled at me and I obeyed, taking a step to the side. It saved my life. I felt a raging current of power suddenly unleashed from below and the world exploded. I tumbled down through heated shards of what had been tiles a moment ago, shielding my eyes, as a curse passed close enough to rustle the Mantle of Woe. I hit the ground a moment after, swallowing a scream as I landed on my bad leg, but I stood through the pain to face a simple oaken staff being pointed towards me. A ragged figure in faded grey robes, eyes lifeless and long black hair tumbling down his back, stood before me inside a circle of wards. The Tumult, greatest spellcaster in the Dead King's service, began to incant. Instinct pulled at me again, the warning of certain death, but before I could heed it and *move* a cacophonous noise drowned out everything else and the ground shuddered.

The wall blew up a heartbeat later, spraying shards everywhere as the flying fortress crushed three city blocks and I had to pull Night to be just so the shockwave wouldn't splatter me all over the walls. The Tumult was not so lucky, his wards allowing through no harm but just enough wind that he was smacked flat against his own magic shield. Breathing out raggedly I released the Night, wiping dust out of my eyes, and found laughter bubbling out of my throat as someone floated down to the ground to stand between me and the Scourge. Akua Sahelian, armoured from head to toe and somehow still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, stared down the undead mage

"This one you can leave to me, darling," she drawled. "We never did finish our little chat in Hainaut."

In the distance I heard hooves, followed by war cries in Mthethwa, and finally I let the laugh free.

Time to collect some scalps.

## Chapter 60: Blood

*"When the gathered princes of the Alamans demanded to know by what right she asked them to swear obeisance, Triumphant laughed and replied: 'To be Dread Empress of Praes is to be a question asked of all Creation: will you kneel, or be made to?'"*

*– Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes*

I'd never seen her wear that armour before.

A plumed conical helm of steel worked with gold engravings led to a sheet of mail covering her throat, all of it above a beautifully worked set of red chain mail covered in parts by segmented plate – pauldrons sculpted like lionheads, an ornate breastplate with a crimson sash for belt and skirted panels that covered both her legs down to her knees. It was all red and gold, save for the sword sheathed her hip. That was pure steel except for the egg-sized ruby set into the pommel. The entire set shone with subtle engravings that reeked of magic. Protective enchantments, I guessed. I made myself stop staring, though not quite quickly to avoid an amused quirk of those full lips.

"You sure you've got him?" I asked, gesturing at the Tumult.

He was rising to his feet, magic already ticking around his hands.

"My heart," Akua drawled, "if I had him any more, I would already have spent him."

"A yes would have sufficed," I informed her, pulling at Night.

"Ah," she smiled, "but where would the fun in that be?"

Tendrils of shadow tossed me up a moment later, even as I smelled a scent like ozone and heard Akua say something in Mthethwa that sounded a lot like 'how pedestrian'. Well, if she could afford to be that condescending I figured she'd be all right. I landed with a hiss of pain atop the tiled roof just in time to watch the Red Knight lose a few teeth. Even most Named I knew would have died when taking a hit of the Mantle's mace on the side of the face, but instead the villainess was thrown like a rag doll and spat out a few bloody teeth. The Mantle did not pause to rejoice, instead turning to me without batting an eye as I looked for the other Revenant that'd been there and found him missing. I was not sure whether to be glad of that or not.

I pulled on Night and released most of it, tossing a handful of black flame her way, but just as I'd thought she immediately pulled her favourite trick: the world went black as she drenched

the area in darkness. For me, anyway. The worst part of that trick had always been how it didn't affect her at all.

Fortunately, she'd used it often enough I was not in the least surprised. And, more importantly, I sunk the last of the Night into the tiles of the roof. A heartbeat later I felt one resonate as a step was taken on it, so without hesitation I flicked my wrist and agitated the Night in the tile: it blew up. The darkness faded, revealing the hole the Mantle had just fallen through, and I smiled. The Scourge was twice my size and encased in the heaviest armour I'd ever seen, but those strengths came with costs. Like, you know, weighing enough that you'd fall right through any weakened rooftop instantly. I limped to the side, a cursed turning to powder the tile I'd been standing on a moment earlier, and through that opening tossed another handful of black flame at the Mantle. I'd used the fire on her often enough to know it wouldn't do shit to that armour, but there was one thing it was quite good at: blinding the Revenant senses that she used instead of her eyes.

So while she put out the fire I'd just thrown in her face, I continued limping away and let the Night rage through my veins. I wove strands quickly, doubling back to strengthen them, and I had just finished the second layer when I felt the Mantle lose her temper. Or so I assumed, because she'd put enough strength into that curse there was goosebumps all over my skin. I kept backing away, but it came to nothing when the entire roof turned into smoke beneath me. *That's a problem*, I idly noted as I began to fall. The way she waiting for me below, already beginning the swing that would smash my ribs and rupture my guts, was also something of a problem.

Fortunately for her, I had a secret weapon.

*"Know your place,"* the Red Knight snarled, and smashed her war hammer into the back of the Mantle's head.

There was a satisfying sound as the back of the Revenant's helmet crumpled, but to the villainess' surprise her blow went no deeper. The real win was my insides staying on the inside, though, as the Mantle had to kill her swing long enough to backhand the Red Knight through a wall. That was two wins, really, when you thought about it. My Name tugged at me and I did not resist, angling my fall. My bad leg gave when I landed, to my swallowed moan of pain, but the way I dropped down ended up ensuring that a boiling curse didn't end up cooking my brain so luck me. Wincing as I rose, I stepped out of the way of a mace swing. I wasn't worried up close, at least.

The Mantle had been a priestess in life, not a warrior. Her danger up close came from strength and size, not skill, and I was a few years past being scared of something just for those.

"You know," I said, "I've never heard you talk."

The swing shattered the wall behind me but a half-step took me out of the arc, and she wasn't quite quick enough with the follow-up curse: I tossed a handful of black flames at her wrist before she loosed it, scrapping her aim. It went through the open door and melted stone in the street. *Nasty*, I thought.

"I can't tell if you're one of those Neshamah had to cut up the soul of badly so they'd obey," I said, "or if it's because there's just no mouth to speak with under that helm."

It was an impressive piece, admittedly, covering her entire face in lengths of steel save for two downwards eye slits. The spikes that went past the crown of her head almost evoked the shape of a crown. The floor trembled as the blow meant to rip down through my shoulder hit nothing but air and stone while I twisted my will, keeping an eye on her as I took the working I'd crafted earlier in hand. Almost ready, I just needed her distracted. A heartbeat later what looked like a wave of pure heat melted through half the room we were in, forcing her to hastily backpedal away while in the distance I heard Akua call the Tumult a clumsy debutante in Mthethwa. *That'll do*, I mused, and pulled.

The string of Night twanged over my head, pulled tight by one of the pulleys I'd formed out of sight, and it caught the Mantle in the chest. The force of the pull slammed her into the wall, where she immediately began to struggle to get out. I took a limping step forward, raising my hand.

"That's the problem with being so large," I told her. "Makes you an easier target, and you need so much room to move."

Another chord passed over my head with a twanging sound, tightening her against the wall. And I didn't need to bend because she was so tall, not because I was fucking short. I was a goddamn queen, so implying otherwise was treason. The Mantle changed tactics, moving to smash the wall she was being pinned against instead, but I flicked my wrist and another chord bound her while she was trying to move it. No room, no swing. She could be as strong as she wanted, without space to move it meant nothing. I bound her twice more as I approached, closing in.

"I couldn't help but notice you usually move when using a curse," I told her. "Not everyone needs that, but then you weren't born a priestess of curses were you? While you breathed it was Light you used. It's not your speciality."

And undead, for all their strengths in some regards, could not truly learn. If it had been a limit for her while she lived, she would not overcome it no matter how long she existed. I raised my sword, pulling on Night, and dipped into my Name to **See** what lay ahead. I paused in surprise, which almost cost me my life. When

her mace exploded with power, a blind curse of wrath shattering the wall the Mantle was bound to, I froze for a moment as I returned to the here and now. Tearing through the chords of Night she swung down with all her strength, but in the moment that I beheld the present I saw it. An opening. A half step to the left as the mace came down, inclining my head even further and angling my body so that the diagonal downwards swing missed by a hair's breadth.

She pivoted, other hand coming to slam a curse into my belly even as she broke the floor with her mace but I pivoted and smoothly, almost gently, thrust upwards. I'd barely even taken two steps, I thought as the point of my sword slid into the eyehole, but then that was the difference between strength and skill wasn't it?

**"Silence,"** I said, aspect burning down my blade.

Her power winked out and her limbs dropped as I felt steel cut into bone. As I'd thought, she couldn't actually move around that mass of steel she was encased in without the help of something like an enchantment. I knew deep in my bones that the aspect would only silence the Mantle's power for a moment, but a moment was all I needed. I pulled on Night as I raised my free hand, moving to slam it onto the pommel of my sword to incinerate everything inside the armour, but before I could sorcery bloomed above my head. Gods, I thought as I glanced up, above *everyone's* head.

Storm clouds roiled, but that wasn't half as worrisome as the lightning I could see rippling inside them.

I hastily threw up the Night I'd been pulling in into a shield instead of a killing stroke, feeling it shudder as lightning struck at it. And then twice more. I backed away, half expecting a mace to be swung at my head, but after I took cover under an arch what I saw was that the Mantle had been blasted as well. She'd dropped her mace. Unlike me, though she was able to walk a lightning strike off. Something she proved by hastily leaving the house we'd been brawling in, turning the corner and out of sight. *Fuck.* I took a step forward, wanting to pursue, but lightning began to fall again and I had to put up a shield of Night. Cursing, I doubled back to where I'd left Akua only to find her already headed my way.

"That's the Tumult, right?" I said, pointing upwards.

"It is," she admitted. "I took off both his arms but he fled and threw that up behind him to cover his retreat."

"The Mantle's as well," I grunted. "Can you end it?"

She shook her head.



"Magic was used to make the storm and is still being used to guide strikes, but the lightning storm itself is not magical," Akua said. "Unless I-"

Lightning struck, but that wasn't what caught my attention. It was the way it curved back up, then hit another lightning bolt. *What in the Hells*, I thought, as slowly every speck of lightning within the clouds was gathered into a single sphere. I felt an aspect at work there, but it wasn't the Tumult's. I was sure of that.

"Gods behold," Akua grinned, almost girlish. "It is Masego."

"Lightning's not a form of power, though," I said. "He shouldn't be able to control it."

"Unless," she said, "he copied the Tumult's guiding spell from looking at it, cast it as well and then wrested *that*."

Lightning came down in a blinding wave ahead of us, forcing me to cover my eye and serving as helpful reminder that Masego was still one of the most terrifying people I'd ever met. I was reminded twice over when we linked back up with my legionaries, finding then that the lightning had ended up clearing most of the enemy ahead while essentially razing three city blocks as a collateral. *Fucking Hells, Zeze. You're not pulling your punches today.* As I'd expected, Kallia's band of five had come out ahead in the struggle. I got to hear as much from her, as well as something else I'd spared a moment to wonder about.

"The wizard Revenant retreated with the ragged one," the Painted Knife told me.

I grimaced. So Neshamah had decided they were useful enough to keep for the rematch that no doubt awaited us deeper in. Good to know.

"Stay with the Army of Callow," I ordered her. "I need you to cover them from Named. Akua Sahelian and I will go with the vanguard."

"As you say, Warden," Kallia replied.

The push to the avenue was staggeringly fast, what with Hierophant having essentially vaporized our opposition. We pushed forward and the moment I set foot on the pavement stones I sent a runner back. We were, at long last, past the first hurdle.

Keter's avenues were massive things, all of them at least forty feet wide and paved with massive slabs of granite that went deep into the earth. It was needed for constructs to be able to move about the capital without constantly wrecking everything – no matter how careful a giant death snake was being, it did not stop

being a giant death snake. The rain of ash made it hard for men to see too far ahead, but my dead eye had become a thousand one of Night instead. I saw far and gave a hard smile at what I found: we'd caught the enemy out of position. The avenue went up in an angled slope all the way to the inner-city wall, a ring of stout bastions bristling with soldiers and war machines, and though there were enemies by the thousands gathering along the length of it there was no cohesive force.

It was half a dozen packs of undead being thrown in the way, not a proper army.

"Secure our position," I shouted. "I want those alleys blocked off and a vanguard readied for a push."

Absent-mindedly I pulled on Night and tossed out a ball of black flame, incinerating the head of the beorn that'd risked popping out of cover ahead of my men. The legionaries cheered and got to work with tired professionalism, moving out as the sergeants and lieutenants barked out their orders. Though we'd broken through the Dead King's barricades, our advance put us in a precarious position. We were like an iron spike driven into a block of ice: all the streets around the grounds we'd taken there were still thick with undead. Right now we were suffering only small probes, but that was because they would be gathering in bands led by Binds so that they could mass enough numbers to be a threat when attacking our position instead of blade fodder.

The relative steadiness of our advance was an illusion whose end was fast approaching. If this were another sort of siege it would have been worth it to try to clear the lower city of Keter before we assault the inner wall, but here it would be suicide: we'd wreck our armies beyond repair doing that. Instead we had to push through and roll the dice, driving deep towards the Hellgate so we might take it and the Dead King with it. I grabbed the shoulder of the closest captain – a dusky-skinned Taghreb with chubby cheeks – and leaned in closer.

"Where has Lady Akua gone?" I asked, lowering my voice.

"She has gone to rifle through dead bodies, Your Majesty," the captain replied.

There was not a hint of the distaste in his voice that I would have found in a Callowan reporting the same thing. I almost asked him 'what for', but I was doubtful he knew and it'd mean admitting that I didn't. Instead I sagely nodded and released his shoulder after reminding him to send Commander Spitter's runner my way the moment they arrived. I needed word from the rest of the fight for Keter as soon as possible before deciding whether we should commit to a push up the avenue. The opportunity was there, and soon to fade, but if we were going at it alone it'd be

nothing but an elaborate suicide charge. Thankfully, I did not have to wait long.

Though I had expected one, it was not a legionary that returned bearing news and I cocked an eyebrow when an unexpected pair approached instead. One I was familiar with, a girl in dusty mages robes with a bony face and a scowl bearing Masego's old Name: Sapan of Ashur, the Apprentice. The second I did not know as well, save through the words of others. The Page was not all that tall, though his slenderness gave the impression he was, and his chestnut hair was a riot of enviable curls. His armour was too light for my tastes, a cuirass and leather instead of proper plate or mail, but it was still better than the rapier he'd somehow been tricked into thinking was an acceptable battlefield weapon.

"Should I take it there's no need to wait for an officer?" I asked.

"Commander Issawi decided it would be simpler to send us directly to you, Your Excellency," Sapan said, offering a short bow.

The Proceran mirrored her perfectly but I barely paid attention to him. Issawi, she'd said, and not Spitter. The old commander was probably dead, I grimly realized, and if I remembered the ranks right his senior tribune was another Callowan so she was probably dead too. Our senior officers were dropping like flies, which smacked of Keter targeting them. Fucking Neshamah, he'd figured out our weakness compared to the Legions of Terror: the comparative lack of experienced officers.

"Then speak," I said. "How go the other offensives?"

"Lord Hanno had taken his gate and is pushing towards the inner city, Your Excellency," the Page proudly told me.

Meaning the Lycaonese had once more lived up to their reputation and pushed unflinchingly through the slaughter it'd take to get boots atop a gatehouse of Keter. Good. We'd gambled that they might, sending Hanno and the Kingfisher Prince there on top of a heroic band of five and the Witch of the Woods for magical muscle.

"The other gate?" I asked.

"The Dominion and the Clans were forced to retreat," Sapan told me. "The Warlord decided casualties were too high and their foothold on the gatehouse too fragile to keep up the storm."

*Fuck*, I thought. That meant there was only us coming from the southwest and the Procerans coming from the east of the city. We'd hoped that my army's push would draw enough dead that Hakram and the Blood would be able to take the eastern gate, but that

might have been too ambitious. *It might be why we weren't as badly drowned in soldiers as I thought we'd be*, I mused. Neshamah might have decided to focus on keeping the third army out of his city instead of focusing on either us or the Proceran. If that was true, all those reinforcements were about to begin hammering at the Army of Callow's positions soon. I forced myself to set the speculation aside.

Whether it was true or not didn't matter, since the choice I had to make hadn't changed: we were committing to an attack on the inner wall or not?

"How recent are your news about the Lycaonese offensive?" I asked.

"Half an hour, Your Excellency," the Page told me. "I fought with mercenaries before being sent as a messenger."

However learned his courtesies, he did not quite manage to hide the resentment in his tone. Would have preferred to stay with the push, huh. The Apprentice did not seem so burdened, I could not help but noticed, as befitting of someone who'd gone through the gruelling campaign in the Wasteland under my commands.

"Half an hour," I muttered, drumming my fingers against the side of my leg. "And you say they were pushing deep?"

"They were storming barricades up the avenue when I left," the young hero agreed.

That was the advantage of taking a gate instead of a breach like my army had: the Procerans had been on an avenue from the start. If it went well, I assessed, it was likely that Hanno and the Lycaonese would take a swing at the inner-city wall before my people did. That thought clinched the decision, because the same reason I was hesitating to commit to an attack – fear of attacking the inner wall alone and getting my teeth kicked in – was now also a reason to commit to that very same attack. It'd be the Procerans getting their teeth kicked in, if I left them to hang high and dry.

"Then there's no room left for hesitation," I said. "I need you two to carry word back to Prince Otto, assuming he still holds command of the Proceran van."

"He does, Your Excellency," Sapan assured me.

"Then tell him I'm taking a run at the inner wall," I said, "and committing all my reserves to the push. I'll see him when we're both through."

The Page looked split between irritation – at being made a messenger again, no doubt – and eagerness at being able to return

to fight with his countrymen, but as far as I was concerned he was just the escort. The Apprentice nodded and I clapped her shoulder amicably before sending them both off. I didn't offer them an escort. That was the point of using Named as messengers, after all: they could get through the undead-infested city without one. It felt like absurd luxury to use champions of the Gods as messenger pigeons, but if there was one place on Calernia that warranted the absurdity it was the Crown of the Dead. I sought more mundane messengers as well, to send word to Commander Issawi that she was to prepare for a push.

That, and to send for my personal standard and the people bearing it.

Akua returned not long after, what she'd been up to during her absence quite evident. She was riding what could generously be called a horse, at least in shape. It was a necromantic construct, made out of stripped parts from ghouls and larger monsters. Sloppy in some ways, I mused, since some muscles had clearly been melted together – a brute force method – and the sections that'd been sown together sported shining thread. An enchantment, not real thread, and so vulnerable to being dispelled. Still, I could only be impressed that she'd put together what looked like a leathery horse-shaped golem in what could only be half an hour. It was moving pretty well, too, its bone hooves clacking light against the stone.

"Expecting to need a horse?" I idly asked.

She cocked an eyebrow at me.

"The enemy up the avenue are in disarray," Akua said. "Knowing you, you will want to strike while the iron is hot."

She did know me, I thought with the usual mixture of pleasure and dread. Enough that a glance at what lay ahead had been enough to figure out what I intended, apparently.

"Can you reach the flying fortresses?" I asked. "I need to send word."

"I already have," she said, "but another was ahead of me."

I blinked in surprise.

"Marshal Juniper has ordered the Old Mothers to move to support the push towards the inner wall and the rest to protect the Army of Callow's flanks," Akua amusedly said. "It seems I am not the only one who can see through you, dearest."

*Gods, Hellhound, I thought, still awed after all these years. Any report you get should be at least half an hour behind me and confused, on top of having a lesser read than I on what's going*

*on at the front.* And still she'd been a step ahead of me. I closed my eye, sinking into Night to find Zombie and have a look through her senses, only to find that below the hippocorvid two banners flew. I jostled back into my own body, lips twitching as I corrected my estimate to Juniper of the Red Shields having been two steps ahead of me. I turned to glanced behind me, Zombie large black wings folding as she plunged down through the sky and landed on the stone behind me at a run, circling around me as legionaries hastily got out of her way. Further back, more of my soldiers were moving.

Parting to make way for the same people I'd sent for now knowing my marshal had already sent them out: banners high, the Order of Broken Bells came forth.

Cracked bronze bells on black flew by the Sword and Crown, under them the first order of knights raised since the Conquest advancing in good order. Horses and men barded in steel carved with hymns to the Heavens as my people had done for centuries, killing lances raised not yet lowered for the charge. There was not a man or woman among them whose armour was not scuffed and dented, who'd not had at least a horse killed under them. Grandmaster Brandon Talbot rode at their head, the raised visor revealing his strong jaw and neat black beard. The once-heir to Marchford had gone from my prisoner to one of the few nobles I actually liked – if not trusted – over the years and led his knights through many a battlefield in my name.

Too many, perhaps. The Order of Broken Bells now numbered eighteen hundred, a respectable number given the losses in the Wasteland and on the plains of the Ossuary, but that was a fragile thing. When the siege of Keter had begun, I'd given a permission to Talbot that I had denied him throughout my entire reign: he was to knight his squires as he wished, without regard to age or training. The Broken Bells fielded eighteen hundred knights because there were no longer squires in the order, and barely any spare horses left for that matter. The strength mustered today was the last they had to wield, and should it perish the riders of Vivienne's own knightly order would be the last cavalry left in the kingdom.

The Army of Callow had fought too many battles, too many wars. Even after draining my kingdom dry of manpower as fee queens before me had dared, we were running out of war bodies to put in suits of armour – much less the likes of knight, costly to arm and train as they were.

"We come as called, Your Majesty," Brandon Talbot greeted me.

I held out my hand and Zombie nuzzled it, rubbing her feathered cheeks against the gauntlet. I patted her until she purred, only then moving to hoist myself onto the saddle.

"I have work for you," I said.

He glanced at the avenue, the dead gathering there in throngs of thousands and beginning to raise barricades. The nobleman spared a look for Akua as well before returning his gaze to me.

"To ride into the jaws of death," Sir Brandon said, sounding rather pleased.

There was, I thought, such a lovely madness to my people sometimes. I rolled my shoulder, limbering my sword arm. I was getting cramps, the costs of not spending enough time on the training field these days.

"Momentum's still on our side," I said, "but we need to prevent the enemy from consolidating before the Third Army can begin its push. That means trampling..."

I trailed off, flicking a glance at the gathering horde.

"All of that, more or less," I idly finished.

"An afternoon's work," one of the knights called out.

There was grim, satisfied laughter. I indulged them with a smile, because if they hadn't earned the right to a few harsh boasts then who on Creation had? I caught Grandmaster Talbot's eye.

"Do you remember the first time we met, Brandon?" I asked.

The bearded man smiled.

"I could forget my name, Your Majesty, and still remember that," he said.

"You thought I was too young," I teased.

"The world's gotten older," Brandon Talbot simply said. "So have we."

True enough. Flakes of ash crusted at the edge of the banner first raised from a cell, the cracked bells on imperial black that I had chosen as much as a warning as an emblem. I felt the warm breath of the Beast against my cheek, just as I had that day.

"Do you regret it?" I suddenly asked. "That you knelt that day, struck your bargain."

The brown-eyed man studied me for a long moment, his face grown hard to read.

"There were times I did," the grandmaster admitted. "Lows and long nights, when the bodies piled too high."

I did not dare interrupt, breath caught still in my throat.

"But here we are," Brandon Talbot softly said, gesturing at the horror around us. "The end of our road, Catherine Foundling. Perhaps of all our roads."

The knight smiled.

"It has been a long ride," he said, "but I regret nothing, Queen of Callow."

The breath I'd been choking on left my lips, ragged, and I offered a stilted nod back. Sometimes you didn't know you'd wanted to hear something until after you'd heard it.

"Then come on," I said, voice steadying as it rose. "All of you. It has been too long since the Dead King last heard the horns of the knights of Callow."

My sword cleared the scabbard, rising to catch a glint of sunlight.

"Let us remind the Enemy," I said, "why so many learned to fear the sound."

I guided Zombie with my knees, leading her forward into the avenue. Talons scraped against the stone, her wings folded close to her side, as behind me men began to move. The banners flew high, catching wind that shook off the ash, and the knights of Callow sounded the old defiance. The horns sounded once, twice, thrice.

*All knights charge*, the call went, and charge we did.

—

It was like a clap of thunder, the sound of a wedge of heavy cavalry going through a shield wall.

I hacked down half-blindly, smashing open an iron helm as Zombie barreled through the undead and all around me heavy lances tore punched through shields and corpses alike. I hacked and hacked, like a farmer reaping wheat, until suddenly there was nothing but stone pavement before me and my mount let out a cacophonous caw. I led her forward, only slowing when knights began to catch up. Half of them had discarded broken lances, unsheathing swords to replace them.

"REDEMPTION IN STEEL," Grandmaster Talbot shouted.

A hard cheer echoed him, and we gathered into a wedge again. Ahead of us, another shield wall was forming even as behind us the shattered remains of the thousand skeletons we'd just trampled into dust fled the avenue. The Third Army's banner was



on the move, I saw. The push was beginning, we needed to clear the way for it. The horns sounded again, and we began to advance at a trot. Akua pulled close to me, her necromantic mount keeping pace as she held her sword like someone who'd not used one in too long. The enemy brought a few spears out in front of the shield wall, maybe half a hundred, but it was not them my eye sought.

I felt sorcery at work, and soon found it: cabals of robed mages, skeletons with burning green eyes and not a speck of flesh left, stood at the back of the shield wall shaping eerie cubes of what looked like smoke.

"Akua," I shouted.

I heard her snarl out an incantation even as the Order of Broken Bells quickened, going from trot to gallop. We began to close the distance, the smoke cubes rising in the air even as Akua's fingers traced runes in the air and tore through them, but it was not to be so simple. On the streets that flanked us on both sides I saw movement, creatures looking like pale white – the pale of foul flesh, of creatures from deep water all wet and shining – hounds rising from crouches to break into a run. There were hundreds of them, and with an angry hiss I pulled on Night. I scorched our left flank, the abominations fleeing the black fire, but those to the right got through.

They leap with unnatural agility, baring half a dozen mouths full of curved teeth, but that was not the nastiest turn. Those that were cut or pierced took the blows like butter, staying stuck. It was fat, I realized with dim horror. The fat of corpses, riddled with teeth and unleashed like hounds. Men and horses tumbled down where the abominations caught them, biting into our wedge, but moments later I could spare no more thought for it: thunder clapped as I slapped away a spear and Zombie trampled the shield wall, tearing into the enemy. I hacked and hacked, arms burning from the toil as my Name steadied my hand and whispered lovingly in my ear. We would win, it promised. We would get to the end.

The cubes of smoke were brought down on us, exploding into clouds that smelled of death, but though a handful of knights choked to death in their armour the worst of it was blown away by the burst of wind that Akua smashed into the enemy, blowing away soldiers as much as the smoke. The hole it made relieved pressure enough for the Order to finish breaking through, barrelling through the undead and continuing down the avenue. We slowed, formed up into a wedge again as I tossed fire behind us to keep the fat hounds away – they were vulnerable, a spark was all they needed to light up – and our eyes moved ahead. There the enemy had gathered up, dragging up chunks of wall to make a barricade as archers and javelinmen massed behind thick lines of skeletons.

And beyond them, I saw, it was worse. Three more large knots of enemy, getting larger and better dug in. Half a dozen smaller

ones at least. How many knights were dead already? Too many, I thought, and it would only get worse as we tired and began to slow.

“REDEMPTION IN STEEL,” Grandmaster Talbot shouted.

They shouted it back and we broke into a trot, advancing unflinchingly. Curses shot out from the enemy formation but the knights laughed, the sorcery sliding off their armour like water off a duck’s back. Akua screamed an incantation, throwing at the enemy a swirling ball of darkness that exploded into drops. All of the undead they touched twitched and began to turn on each other, hacking away. The Order of Broken Bells cheered, cheered the deed of a woman they had hated an hour ago and would hate again an hour from now. There were hardly any lances left, all of them left in broken bodies, but the handful remaining were lowered as we broken into a gallop.

I watched the flanks, and my vigilance was not for naught: I caught the movement first. Ghouls that had crouched atop rooftops suddenly rose, leaping down and running towards us with howls, as something altogether more sinister rose behind them. They looked like great worms of bone, though the tail ended looking like a lizard’s and under their ‘neck’ two leathery, spindly arms ending in claws jutted out. It was the lungs that drew the eye, though, two bulging great sacks like a bullfrog’s stomach with the appearance of muscle that were pumping in air and swelling. Using the clawed arms to drag themselves into position atop the roofs, the creatures all turned to face us and unhinged their ‘heads’ to reveal toothless maws.

The spat clouds of some foul black gas at us, filling the air.

Akua incanted again as we tore through the ghouls in our way, hacking at the flesh, but they’d not been meant to win, only to slow us. Volleys of arrows fell in a thick rain, the gas drifted towards us on a lazy wind and the enemy mages began their rituals. I pulled deep on Night, ignoring the gas – Akua would have to take care of it – as Brand Talbot shouted for the knight to form up, to prepare a charge anew at the enemy ranks. It was turning sour on us, I realized, and... and a shadow was cast over us all. Wind screamed as the flying fortress approached and lightning began to fall in the enemy’s ranks. A heartbeat later, the bottom of the fortress let out a burning light that tore through half a dozen houses in a heartbeat.

And then ladders were lowered.

“Forward,” I shouted, “forward!”

We cut through the last of the ghouls as Akua blew black the gas, tightening ranks as we broke into a gallop again. An arrow slid off the side of my helm and another sunk into Zombie’s skull,

which annoyed her more than anything else. The Order smoothly split into two wings, one for each opening in the enemy barricade, and we thundered through. I screamed myself hoarse, hacking away at a sea of skulls and rotten faces, hands and blades coming at me from all sides. From the corner of my eye I saw a scythe hit Akua's armoured wrist, slapping her sword out of her fingers, and with a shout of anger I torched the Bind that'd dared. We pushed at the ranks of the enemy, the momentum of our aborted charge now gone, and knights began to drop.

But even as legionaries began to land on our side I found that the undead before me no longer bore swords, only bows and javelins and crossbows. I had reached the back.

"Almost through," I shouted.

"Callow," the shout came back. "Callow and the broken bells!"

But we were slowing, dying and I had begun to pull on Night again when a spell hit the middle of the enemy formation and crushed half a dozen soldiers with a projectile. No, I realized a heartbeat later, not a spell. High Marshal Nim, the Black Knight of Praes, rose from her crouch and swung her warhammer with a great cry.

Undead were scattered like leaves in a storm.

And just like that, it began to turn around. I could feel it in my bones. The sky filled with thousands of tons of stone and arrogance and they gathered again, my ragged Order of Broken Bells. Spells fell on the dead like summer rain. Fire and lightning and frost, acid and darkness and smoke that moved and swallowed men. Wind blew up in geysers, sand heated almost to glass was thrown in sheets half a mile wide. And curses, curses of the likes Calernia had learned to fear: iron rusted and bent, flesh melted and bone turned to powder. Souls were ripped out of Binds and turned into streaks of weeping flame, skeletons exploded into shards. And worse, curses even *Keter* stood in fear of.

And as the mfuasa unleashed a millennium of learning on the enemy, the lords of ladies and Praes came down to fight.

The Legions of Terror were forming, steel ranks spreading out in every direction with my father's cold ghost smiling through their eyes. Legion mages torched ghouls with methodical and concentrated volleys, sappers disappeared entire ranks of the enemy with sharpeners. The heavies smashed through the enemy ranks like they were made of paste, regulars following behind: orcs locking shields with Taghreb and Soninke and Duni, the shadow of an empire dogging their footsteps. And yet it was not them I my eye was called to as the Order formed up again. It was the splendid few, the beautiful monsters in armours glittering of

gold and jewel who stood out among drab and smoky Keter like a flock of birds of paradise in a gutter.

The nobles of the Wasteland, household troops standing around them like a fortress of steel, reminded the world why the Dread Empire of Praes had ruled Calernia from sea to sea.

Devils filled the sky, winged and shouting in the darktongue, as an empire's worth of hidden vaults was emptied at the hosts of Keter. The air filled with fire and blood dripped from the sky, the wind itself turning red as the High Lord of Okoro rode it on a chariot and sowed burning seeds of fire like a farmer on the field. Storms roared in wrath as the High Lady of Kahtan unleashed the old spirits bound by her house, colossal things of ruin and wind striding the field. Ghouls fled before the unleashed bestiary of Aksum like whipped dogs, tides of fouled water swept hundreds as the High Lord of Nok commanded the waves and at the heart of them all Sargon Sahelian was laughing, baring his crooked smile like fangs.

He wielded thirteen pillars of stone large as towers, crushing enemies beneath them like a child hammering down at ants with a pestle.

But beyond them all, behind them all, the woman who had once been Dread Empress Malicia struck deeper still. For with the falling ash from the sky now fell paler motes, spread about by the fortresses. Still Waters, refined and turned into even more terrifying a weapon. Wherever legionaries fell, now they rose again with empty eyes as eights. Unflinching, obedient, unrelenting. And the enemy buckled as well, for the ritual lighting up within the fortresses were not only for the Praesi dead: they were also for Keter's. Stealing dead from the King of Death was perhaps too much, but to shatter his hold? Oh, that they could do. Wherever enough of the compound fell, the dead went wild.

Turning on each other, maddened by wrath and despair as the behest of the last empress of Praes.

And we sat the saddle at the heart of it all, the worn survivors of the Order of Broken Bells. *Redemption in steel*, the cry went up, and we charged. We went through bone and ash, a ray of fire from a fortress opening a path. We cut through towering abominations that looked like the bones of giants trailing ribbons of flesh, shattering knees as the rope-like flesh tore men off horses and ripped them apart. We carved through apes of rotting flesh and the wriggling worms of spoiled blood they burst into, faceless horrors of sown flesh that oozed sickness.

The further we got the harsher the fight, skeletons bearing shells full of burning oil throwing themselves at us as broken bones rose together into drakes mad of soldiers' remains and acid

began to fall from the sky, burning at armour and searing flesh. But we got through, Merciless Gods. We smashed and hacked and died, until before us stood the heights of the inner wall and the iron gate barring the way past it. Enemies bristled atop the walls but Grandmaster Talbot shot forward, hammering at the gate thrice with the pommel of his sword, and I laughed myself hoarse. We'd fucking done it. Behind us, flanks covered by the Legions, the ranks of the Army of Callow approached.

We'd gotten them to the wall.

## Chapter 61: Break

*"If victory were not sweet, we would not drink its poison so deeply."*

*– Dread Empress Terribilia*

We came at the wall in waves.

Thirty feet of stone, topped by an army's worth of dead. Bastions that rose even higher to make room for the siege engines to fire, bristling with catapults and ballistae. Wards crackled with power as the first ladders were laid against the wall, cracking the steel-capped wood, and out of sight dead mages stood in circles to weave rituals that would turn men to screams and dust. I sent away Zombie after the second time she was shot under me, back on my feet with a sword in hand. Legionaries – mine and Praes', in the smoke and ash it was hard to tell them apart – put up their shields above their heads as the dead shots bows and threw chunks of masonry.

I saw an orc's head turn to pulp as rock the size of a table went through his shield, the corpse toppling to the ground with it. Javelins punch through plate, sorcery tore burning holes in the shield walls and above us the clouds were turning dark again. I tossed around Night heedlessly, feeling the coolness in my veins begin to turn raw – like sandpaper was being dragged around my insides – and shattered a parapet just in time for a young legionary to land her ladder into the rubble. A heartbeat later a skeleton wielding a hooked pole tried to push it back, but Akua's hand shoved me aside as she yelled out an incantation in the mage tongue.

A ball of translucent sorcery formed around the top of the ladder, expanding into a shield that blew the skeleton off the rampart.

"Forward," I shouted, ducking low to avoid a whistling arrow. "It's the last wall!"

Half a lie. The palaces would have walls of their own and the Dead King's lair as well, but it was true there were no ramparts left lying ahead. Behind the heights of stone stood the inner city of Keter, the central third leading to the ancient hills turned plateau the city had been built around. It would be the hardest fight yet, I knew, but my blood still sang at the knowledge that *we were there*. We'd nearly made to the heart of Keter, past all the horror and madness. We were so close to the last struggle I could almost feel it on my tongue. The girl who'd landed her ladder began to climb, but three rungs up she dropped with an arrow in the throat. Her body fell to the side, rising a wight, and a large orc began his climb.

I hurried there, elbowing soldiers as I went and Akua following in my wake. Legionaries kept taking the ladder and they kept dying, the dead intent on snuffing out the first ladder landed, but concentrating their fire cost them. Other ladders began to stay up, and as the twentieth body died to rise undead my own boot touched the bottom of the ladder.

"Catherine-" Akua began.

"Keep them off me," I interrupted, and sword in hand began the climb.

My bad leg throbbed. It'd been too long since I'd last put on full plate as I now wore and I wasn't used to the weight anymore. But climbing up the ladder wouldn't require me to dance around, just to keep going. Akua cursed profusely, but even as arrows began to fall on me from both sides roiling winds shot up to blanket me. A rung, then another, and as I rose a legionary stepped in to follow. A javelin came from above and I had to press myself against the wall, the wood of the rung digging into my throat, and though it passed me the man behind me took it in the eye. Another rung. There was a shout from below and I looked to my left, drawn by instinct, only to find a blur of movement.

I pulled on Night and threw black flame at it, the heat and power of the impact forcing the ballista bolt off course. Gods, that would have gone right through my ribs.

I hurried up and I was two-thirds through when the shield Akua had bespelled to protect the top of the ladder shattered under a stream of curses, breaking into shards that soon faded. Even as I desperately dragged myself up I saw a pair of skeletons with hooked poles catch the side rails and begin to push. There were soldiers beneath, enough that the ladder weighed too heavy to easily push, but it moved backwards half an inch and my heart leapt up in my throat. I climbed another rung as Akua blew one of the skeletons away, but it was replaced in a heartbeat and more began to put their hands to the pole to push. *Fuck*, I thought as I went up another rung and saw I wouldn't make in time.

The ladder was pushed back another inch, and it was so close to the angle that'd topple us that I hissed. I threw Night in clumps but the skeletons I shattered were replaced, and as I went up another rung the ladder began to topple – until I snarled, sending Night racing down the edge of my blade, and hacked at the hook of the closest pole pushing us back. The strike went right through, the headless pole dipping down and getting stuck between rungs as the weight shifted. Half the ladder was against the wall again, and with a triumphant cry I went up another rung. Close enough to hack at the legs of the skeletons, though I had to duck back under to avoid getting impaled by a spear.

I tossed a ball of black flame over the edge as I did, and a heartbeat later I was atop the wall.

It was a bloody whirl after that. I couldn't even tell how many of them I was fighting – they were coming from all sides, with swords and axes and spears. I ripped a dagger out of one's hand after blowing through his head with Night, taking it as parrying blade, but Gods I wished I had a shield. Legionaries followed behind me and we were pushed back-to-back, forced to keep our foothold on the wall open with the clash of steel. I parried and struck with the strength of my Name, shattering arm bones and cracking skulls, until I felt Akua behind me again and suddenly the wall to our left was a frozen block of ice. I moved to cover her while she stood back panting, face trickling with sweat, and took off another skeleton's head after turning his blade aside with the dagger.

Legionaries kept coming up, wights among them, and I took a few steps back from the melee to catch my breath. It allowed me a look at the fighting on the wall beyond us, which was a grim sight. We were landing ladders more easily now that we'd forced the dead to fight us up close as well, but soldiers were dropping like flies. Would I even still have an army come nightfall? *If the Praesi hadn't come we would all be dead*, I thought.

Akua's ice broke as curses struck it from below, exploding into a shower of shards – I felt some cut up my cheeks and the side of my nose, blood flowing free – but a ladder was being landed past it and I moved that way, sword high as I called for soldiers to follow. The push was aborted, though, when arrows of bright red flame tore through the enemy and there was the howl of wind. A heartbeat later the Rogue Sorcerer landed with a fluttering coat among wisps of flame, footing uncertain from the wind magic he'd used to aid his lip.

"Clear the wall," I shouted, pointing my sword at the enemy laying beyond him.

Legionaries charged, sweeping past him and colliding with thick ranks of skeletons. I didn't go with them, instead moving towards my friend as soldiers began to come up the ladder to our side.

"Where the Hells are the Procerans?" I asked him, shouting to be heard over the din. "We're getting butchered out there, Roland."

"They got bogged down," he shouted back. "Ran into the Grey Legion."

I spat to the side, spit sticking to lips and flecking my cheek. Yeah, I couldn't blame them for slowing in the face of those monsters. I'd been hoping the Dead King would hold them back like an honour guard, but apparently they were worth committing to keep Procer off his back while the inner wall was fought over.

"Is the Prince of Bones leading them?" I asked.

"No, he isn't," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Catherine, something's wrong. There's word from the League, the Hawk isn't at the battle out in the Ossuary. Hanno says he fought the Seelie and a pack of Revenants but-"

A crack of thunder drowned out his last words. I got the gist anyway. The Scourges that'd fought had been held back from serious engagements, the Prince of Bones and the Hawk had yet to make an appearance and it all stank to the high Heavens. I went to look for a story, and though I couldn't quite feel out what it was about my stomach sunk when I was faced with tangible proof that there was a story. One about the last remaining Scourges, who numbered five. *About them fighting as a single band. Indrani went out with the army, I thought. We have no one who can check the Hawk except for...* I grabbed Roland by the collar and dragged him close.

"Get the Silver Huntress here," I ordered. "As quick as you can. Send the Painted Knife to get her if you have to, otherwise we're-"

If Akua hadn't slammed a shield in place a heartbeat later, I would have died. The arrow would have gone right through my neck, instead of slowing as it punched through the panel of sorcery and letting me move just quick enough it bit at the side of my helmet instead. I backed away hastily, once more cursing my lack of a shield, which ended up saving my life for the second time in two heartbeats. I heard the crunch even as I felt the air against my face. It was, I realized, a rock. Someone had thrown a rock the size of a small house my way, and it'd come close enough to me I'd felt like a whisper on my skin. It tumbled past the wall, earning screams and then a wet crushing sound, and for a heartbeat terror seized my throat.

Akua was alive, I saw. She'd been moving between me and the edge of the rampart, so she'd been out of the way. The knot in my guts loosened, but only so much. I turned to Roland, who was gaping, and my hand went back to his collar.



"You still have that wind magic?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Why do you-"

"Get me the Silver Huntress," I cut through, and threw him off the rampart.

It was only thirty feet. Wouldn't kill a hero even if he didn't get his artefact out in time – which he did, ending up rolling across rooftop tiles like a human tumbleweed. By the time I turned, Akua had stepped back from the rampart's edge and closer to me. Her free hand was low, magic dancing across her fingers in subtle shifts of light.

"That was the Prince of Bones," the golden-eyed sorceress told me. "And it won't be the last stone he throws."

"We're fucked if we stay here on the wall," I said. "Almost all of them are nasty customers from a distance and we're out in the open. We need to-"

It was prettily done, I appreciated that deep down. First the stone – large as the last, and this time I saw where in the streets it came from – drew my eye and I pulled on Night by reflex, spinning rope around it to swing it around like a sling to throw back. But it had been meant to get caught, and in its wake came an arrow. Akua caught *that*, belted out a spell that had steel shivering all around us and froze the arrowhead in the air. Then the both of us took the Mantle's curse right on, as we'd been meant to all along. I dropped my working on the stone, abandoning it to gravity, but the Night I tried to throw up in the way was just a shade too slow. I was blown off my feet, blinded as I felt myself fall through dust. *Stone*, she broke the stone.

Akua screamed, as much in rage as fear, and the two of us fell down in the street below. I felt blades scrape at my armour and one cut across my face as I abandoned my flesh eye and looked through Night instead. We'd fallen into a knot of enemy soldiers, Akua missing a chunk of her left pauldron and the shoulder beneath it. I glimpsed bone even as she laid a hand on it and flesh formed anew with a hiss. I slashed through a head, then was driven back by a warhammer I awkwardly stopped by hitting the handle but still bounced off my shoulder plate. Snarling, I leaned forward and pulled on Night: I spat out a stream of black flame, incinerating the undead before me. But they'd lasted long enough to slow us, damn them.

I helped Akua back to her feet, hacking away at a spear that came a little too close, the two of us finding out backs to a powder-covered wall.

"We need to get to stairs," she said. "Get back to your troops."

"We need to survive," I grimly replied, looking ahead. "They're here."

The Prince of Bones was hard to miss, hulking shape of steel that he was. Like half a dozen armours had swallowed slightly smaller ones, leaving only a monstrous golem with the outline of a man. His face was a mask of steel, frowning sternly with eyes that were sculpted. Not a hole anywhere on him, only shifting layers of steel and the large greatsword he held in a single hand as he marched towards us. The Mantle was but a step behind him, mace hoisted on her shoulder, but of the Hawk and the Tumult I found no trace. They would remain hidden until they struck, I thought. As for the Seelie...

"Steel yourself," I warned.

A heartbeat later, it struck us like a wave. **Love me. You love me, love me most of all the things in the world. You love me, so obey. Rip her apart.** In the back of my mind Komena sneered and the force broke into smoke, but at my side Akua went stiff. I was already striking by the time the mane of red hair appeared in front of her, but as I opened the throat of a voluptuous redhead in a ballroom gown it faded without my steel touching anything solid. An illusion. The tricky pest always –

"Fuck," I snarled as I felt a knife slide between my ribs.

The Seelie's impossibly beautiful face leaned towards mine, smiling as she went for a kiss, but I grabbed her by the throat and drew on my Name to toss her up. She flew for a moment, then shattered into rose petals as I put a hand to my side. My armour was unmarked. A real wound or another illusion? I'd never fought the Scourge up close before. I shifted under my armour, but the wet I felt could be sweat as well as blood. The pain, though, that was real. Akua was back to herself just in time to throw up that magnetism spell again, though she put her back into it this time: not only did it catch the Hawk's arrow but it also crumpled the three closest ranks of skeletons into balls of metal.

"That," Akua bit out, "was *most* unpleasant."

"Tell me about it," I grunted. "Never been good with redheads."

My flesh eye had been working for some time, but it was still with the others I looked around.

"Stairs to the left," I said. "It's our best chance."

"Depressingly true," Akua noted, which I took as agreement.

We made a break for it. If there was one weakness to the Prince and the Mantle, it was that their bulk made them slow – especially in broken terrain like the ruined street full of undead soldiers we were fighting our way through. The enemy wasted no time in trying to stop us. Rain began to fall in front of us, a ball of clouds gathering and being milked dry of water that is spat out as a torrent of water filling the street. Undead were knocked aside, and though there wasn't enough flow to topple us the street ran wet and our footing slowed. I evaporated the cloud ball with a blast of blackflame, in time for Akua to send a spike of sinuous darkness right into the heart of a sizzling curse – it broke apart instantly.

Undead converged on us from all sides and I could not torch them as fast as they appeared, not without slowing too much. I parried and hacked and tried to push forward but that *fucking* water got everywhere and when I was forced to make an awkward parry I slipped. Akua blasted off the Bind's head but my back still hit the floor, water seeping into my armour by the neck, and I swallowed a scream as my side throbbed. Yeah, the Seelie had definitely stabbed me. I was dragged back to my feet, slashing blindly at a ghouls coming close, but froze when I saw that above us a hundred spear of sizzling lightning were forming. Gods, we were both drenched. It wouldn't even need to hit *us*, just...

I pulled on Night and Akua released me to raise her hand and incant, but the Hawk shot again and I had to spin a sphere of darkness that sucked in the arrow that'd have killed her. From the corner of my eye I saw a flicker of movement – red hair and that fucking smug smile again – as **love me, love only me** pounded away at my mind. Akua shifted her incantation halfway through, flicking her hand and melting the Seelie's face to the bone, but it'd been an illusion. Above us the lightning spears came down as she Scourge reappeared to my side, knife already halfway to my lung, but the Beast laughed into my ear. A boot tore into the Seelie's cheek, her face betraying utter surprise as Hanno of Arwad landed on it feet first.

Above us, the spears had stopped midair. They went an inch down and then back up, as if two wills were fighting for control of the spell. *Masego*, I thought, *you prince among sorcerers*. Forty feet away I saw the Prince of Bones stop to casually rip out a wall and throw it our way, but before I could pull on Night the scent of ozone filled the air. The wall crumbled into dust and through it I saw a silhouette standing atop the wall, a woman in a painted stone mask and a long green cloak. The Witch of the Woods had come, I realized with a pulse of excitement.

"Apologies," Hanno calmly said, getting back to his feet from the crouch he'd landed in. "I must admit I got lost on my way."

The Seelie had faded into golden smoke as she fell under him, though not before receiving a cut across the face for her troubles.

"Fighting back against Ashuran stereotypes, I see," I croaked out, because 'thank you' would have been too much.

It got a snort out of Akua, at least. Wait, should I be worried the Doom of Liesse was the only one who'd laughed?

"I try," Hanno said. "Reinforcements are headed our way, Warden. I called on all we could spare."

I cracked my neck, wiping away some of the blood still seeping down my cheek mixed with sweat.

"Let's see what the Scourges of made of, then," I said, spitting to the side.

Above us the lightning spears suddenly faded. The Tumult, I suspected, had decided it was better to try another spell than to keep pitting his will against Masego's.

"Let's," Hanno agreed, raising his sword with a smile.

The Prince of Bones moved first and I tensed, but to my utter surprise he did not attack. Instead, he turned his back and *ran*.

"Bold," Akua murmured, appreciative.

"Fuck," I feelingly said. "Pursue, *go*."

The Hawk tried to put an arrow in Hanno's eye, who plucked it out of the air with a vaguely irritated look – *come on*, part of me complained, *he's not even Named right now!* – as Akua and I shot forward. The Dead King would have none of it, though. All the undead across four city blocks went still for a moment, and then they began to throw themselves at us. I shouted and let loose streaks of blackflame as I cut through a torrent of soldiers who didn't even try to kill me, just throw themselves in my way, but even when Akua blew them away with a gust of wind it was too late: darkness came down over us, the Mantle covering the retreat of the Scourges with her favourite trick.

It didn't last long with Hanno around, Light coming out in a torrent that shattered the curse, but it was enough. The Witch tossed a few houses at them as they retreated but we caught none and I felt frustration bubble up my throat. The Dead King was denying us a scrap, had been doing it all day. Was he trying to tire us out or simply keeping the Scourges as his last trump card? Either way, dragging Named here would just be wasting them at the moment.

"Hanno," I shouted. "Go help on the wall. Can the Witch help get the Procerans through the Grey Legion?"

"We'll do what we can," he shouted back.

I nodded him thanks and he offered back the sketch of a bow. The cheeky bastard. I felt Akua's eyes on my back and turned.

"To the stairs," I told her, looking back up at the rampart.

The Legions of Terror and Army of Callow had secured more than a dozen footholds, it was time to turn that into a push. The Dead King wanted to play coy? I'd force his fucking hand.

"I'm with you," Akua promised, which I enjoyed hearing more than was wise.

We went back up, scything through the dead, and I found a captain to bark orders for me. We took two companies into the closest gatehouse, clearing out the ghouls and the beorn inside, and then forced the gates open. The steel jaws opened below our feet, soldiers pouring through, and I grinned. Now we had the initiative again. Roland should be back with the Silver Huntress soon, but I wanted us to gobble up a few blocks to hold first. We fought our way back down, arms tired and short of breath, to take the lead of the companies that'd gone through the gate. With a shout I took them to the last dead on the avenue, smashing our way through, and we pushed into the inner city.

Resistance, to my rising discomfort, was sparse. The dead were disorganized, coming at us in disjointed bands, and the push I'd meant to take a few blocks with kept ripping forward through the ranks of the dead. I only began to slow when we were past at least ten blocks, and when I found a great granite gargoyle at a street corner I frowned. I knew this place I realized. This corner. I had once been carried past here on a litter as a guest of the Dead King, dead royalty bearing me to the Silent Palace where I was to be hosted. We weren't just past the inner wall, we were halfway to the heart of Keter. To victory. My heartbeat thundered against my ears and my steps slowed, my legionaries slowing with me.

"Catherine?" Akua asked.

"We're getting close to the five palaces," I said. "We need the arrows in our quiver readied before we go further."

I kept my words vague, since you never knew who might be listening in this city, but she knew what I meant: the Mirror Knight and the Severance, Hierophant and the Crown of Autumn. Going after the King of Death without either would be madness. Neshamah was the most powerful sorcerer Calernia had ever known and likely ever would, fighting him head on in his seat of power

would only get us killed. Not even the Sisters would be able to help me when we got to the hall where the Greater Breach lay and the monster that'd made it would be waiting for us.

"I'll send the signal," the golden-eyed sorceress agreed.

The spell was simple enough, a variation on the signal lights that the Legions and the Army had been using for years. Akua flicked her wrist at the sky, incanting brusquely, and three streaks of blue shot out. After rising high they exploded into a broad circle, one large enough that there would be no missing it even through the poison clouds and the ashen rain.

"Thanks," I said.

Then I turned to the company at my side, its soldiers and officers having ceased to advance when I did.

"We're in deep now, ladies and gentlemen," I told them. "Maybe half an hour's walk ahead are the palace we're going for, and before we can send in Named to end this we're going to need to secure this corner. First we-"

Everyone felt it, when the sorcery lit up. Even the most power-blind of my legionaries felt their bones shake, their soul flinch. My hand shot up, Night already raging through my veins, and Akua was already halfway through a shield spell before we both stopped. The magic wasn't coming from ahead of us but from *below*. Far under our feet.

"Akua?" I asked.

She did not answer, golden eyes gone wide. Instead she knelt down on the ash-streaked ground, ripping off her helmet and pressing her cheek against the stone.

"Akua," I said again, tone sharper.

"The ritual is below," she said, palm against the floor. "Far enough not even Hierophant can trouble it. But there is something more, Catherine. It is an array, a large one, and-"

The pulse washed over us in the heartbeat that followed. It felt like nothing at all, I thought, but then Sven Noc was howling in rage within my soul and Night boiled out without my having even called it. Akua had gotten to her feet, I saw, and was panicking as she shouted an incantation and traced glowing runes in the air. Over the three heartbeats it took her to finish the spell, I saw her face under the helmet change. Lines deepened, the arc of her brow grew more pronounced. My stomach dropped as I turned towards my soldiers. Their helmets were open-faced, hiding nothing: faces aged, skin growing thick with lines and hair turning white.

Before ten heartbeats had passed every single one of my legionaries dropped dead of old age.

"Gods," I croaked, staggering back.

I looked further back at the others who'd followed me past the wall, and saw that behind me lay a trail of corpses that'd fallen down as gently as leaves dropping from a tree. Not a single one of them taken by sword or spear, they'd just... died. The trail of corpses went all the way back to the inner wall, atop which some of my legionaries were shouting in horror. *It ends at the wall*, I thought. Ice seizing my heart I turned to Akua, who was shimmering with pale green light but was, to my immense relief, alive and no longer aging. She panted softly, sweat trickling down her brow.

"That," Akua Sahelian softly said, "aged me at least a decade."

"This isn't time magic," I numbly said. "There's no such thing as time in Trismegistan magic. What the Hells is this, Akua?"

"Not a spell," she said, straightening. "It is Keter's Due."

My fingers clenched.

"You meant he pulled off what you did at the Doom," I said.

"Sucked in the magic of the Due into other arrays and-"

"He was not quite so skilled," Akua interrupted me. "As I said, Catherine, this is not a spell."

She shot a look at the stone under our feet.

"I believe that somewhere under our feet are buried artefacts that were empowered by the wasted magic of the Due," she continued. "Thousands of them, whose only purpose is to tint that emanated magic with a specific kind of entropy."

My eye narrowed. Night raged in my veins, the blessing of the Sisters keeping death from touching me.

"Aging," I said.

"Specifically flesh, I think," Akua said. "Or perhaps living flesh?"

"But that means," I slowly said, "that this isn't even the ritual from below. Then what is that fucking magic *for*?"

Fate handed me the answer, bitch that she was, when in the distance there was an ear-splitting rumble. It was so loud as to drown out even screams, but I saw enough. Over the inner wall I could see the top of some towers, and they were *moving*. The outer city was rotating, Gods save us all. And it got worse, because

when the city ceased turning instead it moved another direction: pushed up by some invisible force, entire districts of the city shot up. Though I could not see it, from the way some towers disappeared I guessed that some districts were going *down* as well. Like some sort of demented jigsaw puzzle, the outer city of Keter had just turned itself into a series of plateaus and chasms.

"Gods preserve us," Akua murmured.

She saw it too, then. This was death, the death of every living soldier in the city. Maybe not immediately, but that single stroke had ensured there was now not even a single *army* inside the walls: all our forces had been moved away from the breaches they'd come in through and then split into smaller pieces, left alone on platforms with whatever enemy forces had been in the district when it was raised or lowered. We'd win some of those fights, for sure. But it wouldn't matter a fucking bit, because now all those soldiers were stuck and the dead would go around extinguishing them one force at a time. There could be no reinforcements, no manoeuvring, and undead could climb goddamn cliffs – or leap down them, if need be. Living people *could not*.

"I've killed us all," I faintly said. "Weeping Heavens, I've killed us all."

The city was as much an army-killer as the dead within it, and I'd driven us deep into its embrace. There would be no recovering from this.

"The battle is not yet over," Akua said. "We can still recover. Retreat, perhaps, if-"

Behind us, dead soldiers began to twitch. And I heard the sound of boots coming from ahead. More undead, soldiers that'd care nothing for this curse of entropy.

"Catherine, we need to go," she urgently said.

I stood there dazed until she pulled at my arm, allowing myself to be tugged away. It was over, I realized. We ran through the rising soldiers I'd just led to their deaths and I felt myself blast those who came too close with Night as if someone else were doing it – Akua could do nothing, all her concentration maintaining the shield that kept her alive – and we ran for the wall, for the gate where some of my soldiers still stood and fought. We climbed the stairs, black flames burning behind us, and as Akua finally released her spell I stumbled to the edge of the rampart. There I saw it all, the madhouse that Keter had become. Raised heights of and deep drops, both moved by some mechanism built deep under the bedrock of the capital.



And as the magic below our feet kept burning, the outer city began to move again.

It span, only what had been a mere imposition was now brutally lethal: houses broke, soldiers and undead fell off the edge of those cliffs as the centrifugal force caught them. And for those below, they found those same broken houses dropped atop their heads by the force of the spin. Shields of sorcery and Light bloomed, trying to mitigate the damage and staying there until at last the spinning stopped, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. The Dead King would just keep spinning his city again and again until the ritual burned out, long after the last of our mages and priests had fallen to exhaustion. And none of this, I realized, not a single part of this was actually aimed at anyone. It was all indirect, distant. The kind of danger that no hero would rise against, that no story would help destroy.

"We lost," I murmured.

The exhaustion of the day caught up to me all at once and my leg gave, tearing a pained gasped out of my throat as I half-fell and had to catch myself against the crenellation. There were shouts of surprise and a moment later Akua was holding me up, arm under my shoulder as she asked a question I didn't hear. Gods, I was so tired. I'd burned myself out on Night, and now that the strength of my Name – the hope of victory – was fading, the edges of my vision were going dark. And I was seeing things, too, because suddenly light got harsher. I blinked dumbly, looking up at a sky that was suddenly cloudless.

"What's happening?" I croaked out.

Akua said something, but it was as if she was speaking through water. I saw them then. Only a few hundred, standing in the ruins of the gate Hanno had broken, but they were impossible to miss: never before had I seen so many giants. And among the Gigantes one stood taller than all the rest, a flame burning within him that hurt my eye to behold.

"Blood loss," Akua said, talking to someone else. "The fucking fool, she's going into sho-"

**"Young King," Kreios the Riddle-Maker called out, "let me remind you who is it that you dare ape with your works."**

When darkness came to swallow me whole, I did not fight it.

## Chapter 62: Finish

*"There should be no second chances. To think your days on Creation as a test, as something that can be won or lost, is a mistake. The peculiar delusion to believe*

*that you are alone and all others are rivals. No lone soul can bear the weight of the world: come Last Dusk, we will rise or fall as a whole. So do not be stinting in kindness, in offering chances without counting them. Come the end, we may find that saving one soul saved all the world."*

*– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand*

-my sword cleared the scabbard, rising to catch a glint of sunlight.

"Let us remind the Enemy," I said, and then stilled.

More words were on the tip of my tongue, defiance and pride, but my vision was swimming and suddenly I felt like emptying my stomach all over the avenue. Something had just happened. I'd just been... Choppily moving around on Zombie's back, I saw the dead gathering in bands down the paving stones that would lead us all the way to the inner wall. Nausea clogged up my throat and I retched drily, pawing at my sweaty face. Tears were trailing down my face, like I'd looked into the sun for too long, but when I turned I saw enough. My knights were going through the same thing, several of them vomiting on the floor while others had been thrown off by panicked horses. *This isn't what happened*, I thought. My blood was pounding away at my temples.

"Akua?" I rasped out.

My eye went to her and found her bent over her necromantic horse, breathing panicked as she tried and fail to say still.

"Sorcery," she got out. "Something..."

She used a word in Mthethwa I'd never head before, maybe from one of the northern dialects.

"I died."

I shifted in my saddle again, feeling like a raft going down rapids as bile rose up my throat. It had been Brandon Talbot who spoke. His face was haggard.

"I remember dying," the bearded knight continued. "Thrown off the edge, the way my skull broke when I landed."

The Sisters were talking in the back of my mind, their voices like the scream of a migraine, and I couldn't even make out what they were saying. It was fast and angry and worried. But I remembered it, just a bit. Charging up that avenue with the Broken Bells behind me, Praes coming to our aid. Storming the wall, setting foot in the Dead King's last redoubt and then... I let out a hoarse scream, clutching my helm as warm nails were

driven into my brain. The pain, Gods the *pain*. Someone laid their soft hand on me, whispering an incantation, but it was dim. Distant. The memories were not. *I led us straight into a trap*, I remembered with dread. There had been no way to know how many had died when Keter had turned into a lethal jigsaw puzzle, but I could hazard guesses.

Armies had been broken, mine worst of all.

"The Riddle-Maker did this," I guessed, forehead burning with fever.

The last thing I remembered hearing was his challenge to the Dead King, though the precise words escaped me. Most the knights seemed all right by now – shaken, but no more than that – but I was still feeling shaky. Had I gotten it worse than most? Why did... no, I could wonder at that later. We had been sent back by an hour, maybe a little more, and now we knew that Keter itself was a death trap meant to shatter our armies. My eye turned to Akua, who looked a little green but otherwise fine.

"I can't feel the ritual getting started," I said. "Can you? If he got sent back an hour as well, he should be striking immediately knowing we won't fall for it twice."

"A ritual on that scale cannot be done by snapping one's fingers, Catherine," the sorceress peevishly replied. "We saw the end, not the preparations. The first steps are likely being taken below our feet as we speak."

Unless the Dead King hadn't gotten sent back – or his memories sent back, or whatever the Hells this was. *That would be too lucky*, I grimly thought. *I have to assume he went back as well*. The only person who could tell me what this all was would be Kreios the Riddle-Maker himself, who was... actually where was he right now?

"Talbot, Akua," I said. "Hold, do not charge."

Both opened their mouths, but before they could ask me anything I'd spurred on Zombie and she took a few bounding steps before leaping into flight. Streaks of sorcery whizzed past us and arrows were fired, though they fell far short, as I the hippocorvid beat her wings hastily and circled ever higher. The smoke was thick up here and ash stuck to my drying sweat in clumps, but I looked with my fleshless eyes and saw where I needed to. The gate that the Procerans had taken not so long ago was full of fantassins and conscripts, but there was not a hint of the Gigantes I had glimpsed there before passing out.

"Are you not here yet?" I murmured.

Gods, I thought. I knew that, like teleportation, 'time' magic was theoretically possible. Not under the Trismegistan theory, sure, but what would a Titan care about that? The sheer amount of power it would need, though, was somewhere between mind-boggling and outright divine. I hadn't thought even an ancient old monster like Kreios the Riddle-Maker would have that in him. *Because we know fuck all about him in the first place*, I thought, *except that he's to Gigantes what Sve Noc are to drow*. Regardless, I had my answer: the Titanomachy was not here, had yet to arrive, and that meant in every way that mattered we were still fucked.

We couldn't stop the Dead King's ritual puppetry of his city and we had nothing prepared to take armies through the field of entropy magic that lay beyond the inner walls. Even if we made better time than our last swing at this, went in better prepared, we would lose. And I had my doubts we'd do better, now that the Dead King had no reason to hold back since his trap had already been revealed. He'd come for us with all he had. I cursed under my breath, knees guiding Zombie into a dive. She screeched, displeased she'd done all this flying without getting to kill anything, but obeyed. I was in no better mood. I'd put it all on the line and it had not been enough, so there was only one thing left to do.

Call the retreat.

We landed back with the Order of Broken Bells, which had formed into a wedge in my absence but obeyed the orders. Akua looked better, I thought after glancing her way. Almost back to normal. My knights were even better, except for a few whose faces were still sickly. *Those who died*, I guessed. Talbot saluted when turned to him, face grim.

"We pull back," I told him. "We can't take the inner city and if we can't do that then we're just throwing lives away."

"It will be butchery getting out," the grandmaster evenly said.

"I know," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "But it'll be a lot worse than that if we stay."

In his eyes I saw he did not agree, and I was not sure whether that was irritating me or making me proud. Maybe a little of both.

"Send riders to the commanders on the ground," I ordered him. "We need to move quickly."

"As you say, Your Majesty," Brandon Talbot replied, fist over heart.

My gaze turned to Akua, who already had a cocked eyebrow.

"I'll reach out to the flying fortresses," she said. "Ask them to cover our retreat instead of our advance."

"Everything they can," I quietly said, eye moving to the dead gathering on the avenue. "This is going to get messy."

I'd been taught an army was never so vulnerable as when it was retreating, and that'd been talking of some field or city. This was Keter.

It was going to get bad.

—

I charged twice with the Order of Broken Bells, to disrupt the dead before they could mass enough to overwhelm our position at the avenue. It was a brisk, shattering business that left skeletons in pieces after which we withdrew. Above us the flying fortresses were pulling back as well, but not before High Marshal Nim gave Keter her goodbyes. A trail of barrels fell in the wake of the retreating fortresses, smashing into the ground to a familiar sight: green flame. The Black Knight unloaded her stocks like a spendthrift, drowning the Crown of the Dead in death all around the Army of Callow's dug in positions. The ogre was not willing to sacrifice the Legions to cover our retreat, but she was willing to do the next best thing.

Word was sent to the Levantines and the Procerans that we were beginning the retreat, though I had no doubt they were doing the same already, and my army closed ranks as it began to cede ground. We'd have to cross the same steel bridges that had brought us here under fire once more, which would be costly, but we'd survive taking a licking like that. The same could not be said of staying in the city. Besides, with the goblinfire surrounding our position we shouldn't be too badly pressed. I sent the Order back, since knights would be of no use in narrow streets packed increasingly tight with our soldiers, and gave Grandmaster Talbot orders to expediate the first bridge crossings.

On my way back to the hill we'd bled so much to take, I found the Painted Knife's band waiting for me. Roland still looked sick, I noticed, but the others were fine. *More sensitive to power?* Didn't matter and I didn't ask. They had news for me and that took precedence.

"All armies are retreating," Kallia told me. "Just heard it from the Page, Warden. The Grey Legion is hammering at the Procerans and my people are on the verge of collapse."

"Why is the Dominion folding?" I frowned.

They hadn't been that badly off last time.

"I do not know," the Painted Knife unhappily admitted. "Neither did the Page. All I can say is that there is a fighting retreat on all sides."

"It's the best we can hope for," I grunted. "At least we-"

I didn't even have time to tempt Fate, it took the lead. Before I could finish my sentence I felt the fabric of Creation begin to bend and scream, as atop the tower in the depths of the inner city a burning glare turned its attention to us.

"Demons," I quietly said. "*Fuck.*"

The Dead King had decided to stop pulling punches, and it went downhill from there. One of the abominations bent the very floor of Keter, wiping away the goblinfire and turning it into a surreal sculpture as undead poured into the breach. To the east instead a two-legged creature without legs whose very silhouette hurt my eye to behold began to eat the green flames, finally answering the old question of whether goblinfire worked on demons. Only some of them, it seemed. What had been an orderly retreat went to shit in moments.

"Akua-"

"I won't be enough," she interrupted me. "We need diabolists, Catherine. We need the High Lords."

She was right, and if the demons weren't contained then it was more than just the Army of Callow that was at risk. They might sweep through right into the camp.

"Fuck," I cursed again, and drew my sword. "Get them down here. On my authority."

In some ways, what followed was worse than Maillac's Boot. There we had picked our grounds, prepared and weighed the risks. Here it was madness on all sides, my soldiers never in the right place while the enemy struck from everywhere. I fought in the whirlwind of the melee, never staying in place, always going where the shield wall was collapsing or the monster had broken through. I emptied myself of Night, torching ranks of Binds and almost broke my arm dragging a soldier out of a collapsing house. Moments later I had to bring down another on top of my own legionaries as a swarm of ghouls overwhelmed them, biting the scream on the tip of my tongue.

The Praesi came, but there was no clean victory to be had here. One of the Old Mothers topped down, the enchantments that kept it aflight twisted by a demon of Corruption, and as I saw that great fortress topple behind enemy lines I knew every soul inside was dead. The High Lords and their retinues came down, joining the desperate fight, and sorcery lit up the dusty sky. Demons were

bound, driven back, and at the heart of it all Akua led them sword in hand. A hand touched my shoulder and I near leapt out my skin, already halfway through a swing when I realized it was Roland. The Rogue Sorcerer was covered in soot, his boyish face drawn and tired.

"The Blade of Mercy's dead," he told me. "And the Skinchanger lost an arm. We were ambushed by the Prince of Bones and the Seelie."

My grip tightened around my sword.

"Pull your band back," I said. "Every Named corpse will be Revenant by tomorrow."

"Kallia already gave the order," Roland said. "The Blessed Artificer was wounded, but she's still covering the retreat across the bridges. We need to get out *now*, Catherine."

"I'm not leaving my soldiers behind," I harshly said.

"Then lead them out of here quickly," he replied. "The Procerans are mostly out of the city now. We're about to have all the Scourges after us, not just two."

That the Hawk had not shot at me or any of mine even once remained a private source of dread. If he hadn't been after us, then who *was* it he'd been shooting at? I spat to the side, into a thick carpet of ash. Much as I disliked it, Roland was right: if we kept retreating with a measure of control, we'd get killed anyway. I was going to have to tell my soldiers to run, knowing they'd get shot in the back all the while. *But it'll be worse if we're the last people in Keter, I thought. That's suicide.*

"I'll give the orders," I said. "Go tell Akua we need to get a move on."

He nodded. I got hold of a captain, then worked my way up the chain to a tribune before I found no one higher. Everyone else was dead. My word was enough to get them moving, and it was exactly as brutal as I'd feared. The dead spilled forth uncontrollably with no shield wall to contain them, and as everyone made a run for the bridges panic began to spread. I made my way to the hill where I'd sent Roland and last seen Akua, but they were further ahead. Behind a half-collapsed house, arguing about something.

"I can still save-"

"Yourself," the Rogue Sorcerer bit out. "Come on, we need to get-"

I saw the glint of the sun on metal, but neither of them did. I shouted in warning even as I pulled on Night, tossing it blindly, but the arrow went through the power like a knife through butter. Akua fell to her knees, a dark-feathered shaft having sprouted in her throat and gone through the sheet of mail.

"No," I shouted, throwing up an illusion to hide them.

Another arrow fell blindly, missing both as Akua clawed at her throat and gasped. Roland put his hand on the arrow and met her eyes. She nodded. I did not have the heart to look, only hearing a wet gurgle. I almost tripped on the stones, falling to my knees next to her as I ripped away the mail and laid a hand on her bloody skin. Her throat had been shredded, now a red mess. I stopped the bleeding with a pulse of Night, but I could not heal. She could, though. Tracing runes in the air, eyes fluttering, she began to close the skin of her own throat. Then I felt the illusion being ripped through. Roland threw out a shimmering shield as I helped Akua up, drawing her close.

She still couldn't talk, she'd lost some vocal cords.

"We run," I said, pulling on Night and throwing another illusion.

Roland suddenly twitched, reaching behind me, and his arm lit up with half a dozen shades of green light shaped like leaves. I ducked, but it would have been too late if he'd not stepped in: the arrow that should have gone through the back of my neck was instead caught in the leaves, punching through them and the mail below to cut the side of his arm.

"Let's," the Rogue Sorcerer fervently agreed.

We legged it. Behind us I saw a flicker of movement and tossed black flame at it without breaking stride, forcing the Seelie to duck away, and we ran for my army and the relative safety of the press of the crowd. Curses broke houses to our sides as we moved, the Mantle revealing she'd not been far behind, and I forced back a whimper of pain as I kept running despite my bad leg. Akua gently pushed off my arm, fine running on her own, and my stomach loosened when finally we reached my soldiers. They parted way for us some, even as everyone tried to hurry onto the bridges even as the ramparts in the distance shot at my crossing men.

Roland stumbled and I caught him, glaring at the man who'd just elbowed him, but that was when I noticed how pale he'd gone. When he dropped to his knees, he didn't get back up. My stomach dropped and I laid a hand on his neck.

"Roland?" I asked. "What is-"

"Poison," he rasped. "Must be."



I found it a moment later and went still. I knew this poison, I'd seen it before. It had been in Hune's blood after the Varlet struck her, and the moment it'd touched Night it had turned into acid and killed her instantly.

"Akua," I shouted, turning around, "I need you to-"

She was already at my side, magic wreathing her hand yellow, but her face was somber. I got up, yelling for a priest, but there were none. They'd already crossed, we were with the last of the rearguard. Roland had gone even paler and his breath was slowing.

"No," I begged, kneeling back down. "*Please.*"

He smiled at me, grasping my hand.

"Charlatans run out of tricks," Roland whispered. "Nothing to it."

"You won't," I said. "We'll-"

I looked at Akua, but she wouldn't meet my eye. The breath went out of me.

"I don't regret it," Roland told me. "I don't. Get them all home, Catherine."

For the first time in years, I let out a sob. He drew me close.

"Beaumarais," he murmured into my ear. "Bury me in Beaumarais. There's a girl..."

He trailed off. His breath was difficult.

"I will," I swore, because what else could I do?

"We did good," Roland whispered, eyes closing. "We did..."

He did not breathe in again. It was over, all because of that small cut on his wrist. A single moment of inattention on my part, that was all it'd taken. I crossed the bridge in silence carrying his body on my back, Akua trailing behind me, swatting stones out of the sky. I went all the way through and up the hill, back to the camp and the tent I had come from. There I found my staff, stuck in the ground, and ripped it free. Eye closed, I sagged against it.

The battle was over.

—

It would take hours before we could count how many soldiers had died — at least twenty-five thousand, by the most conservative of reckonings — but some casualties were easier to count. Names

began to filter in with the reports. Prince Rodrigo Trastanes of Orense had died in battle against the Grey Legion, keeping them off routing conscripts long enough to prevent collapse of the Proceran flank. The captain of Hakram's retinue, Dag Clawtoe of the Howling Wolves, took the Hawk's killing arrow for his Warlord. High Lady Takisha of Kahtan blew her own brains out rather than be taken by a demon of Corruption and High Lord Jaheem of Okoro incinerated himself along with three city blocks when he found himself surrounded.

Not all deaths were worth a story. The princess of Creusens was trampled to death by her own panicked horse, Red Ella – Aquiline's second – was pushed off the wall and broke her neck. The senior legate of the Fourth Army was torched by mage fire from his own troops, which had misheard the order of their captain in the mayhem. War was one third heroism, one third horror and one third the simple cruelty of luck.

Some losses were more keenly felt than others. Levant lost its steadiest hand when Careful Yannu was taken by the Prince of Bones, leaving it in disarray as it retreated from its failed assault. The First Army lost General Zola to a ritual bombardment that'd gotten past Hierophant and two layers of wards. It'd been a nasty curse and an even nastier way to die, taking half of the First's senior staff with her. We were so lacking in officers there was talk that Aisha might need to take command, as one of the few old hands left.

When it came to Named, the amount of death was staggering. The Scourges had focused on them rather than racking up crowned scalps and it showed. We'd lost the Royal Conjurer, the Marauder, the Swaggering Duellist, the Balladeer, the Forlorn Paladin, the Blade of Mercy, the Anchorite, the Bloody Sword and the Pilfering Dicer. The Skinchanger had lost an arm, the Myrmidon a leg and the Stone Carver had been struck blind. I'd known few of them in any depth, so my grief was kept back for the one I had counted a friend.

But I swallowed my grief, got myself patched up and changed my clothes before downing as much herbal painkiller as I could. My day wasn't done: the Gigantes were on their way, and that meant there were talks to be had before I could collapse into a bed and weep.

—

It felt more like a town assembly than a war council.

My preference for fewer people in the room was forcefully set aside by circumstance. Twice over, given that not only did we need a crowd's worth of people but we did not have a room that could fit the Gigantes. The gathering took place outside in an abandoned drilling field, the fate of Calernia to be determined

over beaten earth besides training dummies. Chairs were dragged in, wards layered one after another by half a dozen different mages under Hierophant's watching eye and then we sent for everyone that wasn't already there.

Every Proceran prince left had dragged their hides there, led by First Prince Rozala Malanza and the unofficial second most powerful man left in the Principate: Otto Redcrown. Frederic sat there wearing a pristine doublet in his family colours, with him a few familiar faces. Beatrice of Hainaut and Arsene of Bayeux. Others I did not know as well: the rulers of Aisne, Orne, Arans, Lyonis and Segovia. The absence of Procer's southeast boded badly for Rozala's later reign, the four principalities that had effectively abandoned the rest of Calernia forming a territory as large as Levant and significantly richer. Adding to the crowd were the most prominent fantassins captains, most of them having fallen behind the most powerful among them: Captain-General Catalina Ferreiro of the Liga Bandera, a handsome scarred woman I'd fought with at the Battle of Hainaut.

In the back of their gathering, still a princess in name, Cordelia Hasenbach sat. Her face was calm, but those blue eyes troubled. They had good reason to be, I conceded with a grimace.

The League of Free Cities gathered around Empress Basilia of Aenia like a pack of birds huddling for warmth, save for the exhausted-looking general from Bellerophon and the aggressively unremarkable minder stand behind him. Hopefully the kanenas wouldn't execute the woman, things were tense enough as it was. First Magister – for life – Zoe Ixioni and Princess Zenobia Vasilakis, Basilia's vassals and closest allies, sat to her sides. The philosopher-priest from Atalante, a short man with a wildly unkempt beard, instead stuck closer to Secretary Nestor and the newly-elected Exarch of Penthes, a nervously skinny young man by the name of Leontios Notaris. They were in the finest mood here, however grim that height: their victory out on the Ossuary with dwarven support had been a crushing one.

The Levantines had brought captains as well as Blood, but that'd not been entirely the choice of the last remaining lords and lady of Levant. Lord Yannu Marave had no issue and his designated successor was in Levant. The most influential captains of Alava had come in the stead of their fallen lord, forcing the lordlings and Lord Moro of the Brigand's Blood to follow suit. They were a brawny and bearded lot, fierce of appearance and decked in colourful paint, but Careful Yannu's empty seat seemed to swallow up space at the heart of them. Even Aquiline and Razin seemed a little lost at his absence: they'd been foes in some way, but Yannu Marave had been the Dominion's leading commander for most of the war against Keter.

The Confederation of Praes, artfully arranged around Malicia, had brought not only the Black Knight in her function as High Marshal but also Lady Nahiza Serrif as the ranking mage and the surviving gaggle of High Lords. Leering old Abreha Mirembe had it made it, as had Sargon Sahelian and venomous old Whither, but the High Lady of Kahtan and the High Lord of Okoro left empty seats. The High Lord of Nok was wounded but alive and had sent his daughter to sit in his stead. Their like was still glittering with gold and jewels, but the rest of the Praesi were anything but. The Warlord had brought with him the chiefs of his most powerful clans, which Hakram was turning into an informal council. Oghuz the Lamé of the Red Shields and Troke Snaketooth for the Blackspears, Hegvor Allspeak for the Split Trees and Arban Twelve-Fingers for the Graven Bones.

My own lot were not so numerous in comparison, though we did have some famous names among us. Marshal Juniper and all my generals were the core of it, with Masego and Akua requested to be present to lend their knowledge. Vivienne was here as my successor, Indrani because she was certain to face the Hawk and though Hanno and Ishaq could not really be considered of 'mine' they sat with me as befitting captains of Above and Below subordinate to my office of Warden. I stood in the back of my delegation, draped in the Mantle of Woe and with two great crows on my shoulders.

The Firstborn did not send anyone but General Rumena and my two scribes. They did not need to: as the defence force of the camps, they had yet to try the walls. Their losses had been the lightest of us all, though that would not last. We had been saving them up for the last push, and that was fast approaching. The dwarves had earned the right to have a seat at the table with the foodstuffs promised, then earned it again by fighting alongside the League on the field today. Yet they preferred keeping their distance, sending only the Herald of the Deeps and Seeker Balasi flanked by a pair of armoured guards in heavy plate that covered their faces.

The last, but not the least, was a single man. Kreios the Riddle-Maker was taller than any of the Gigantes I had seen by a dozen feet, his thick skin a pale brown and his hair long. Unlike what I had seen of his kind, he had long brown locks but shaved his face – though not recently, by the looks of the stubble. His eyes were what drew the attention, large pools of a grey so pale it almost seemed white. They were steady and unblinking, as if there was nothing in the world that could possibly concern him. Given that the Titan sat higher than some towers, even seated with folded legs, I could believe it. Though he did not move and had not spoken since the Witch of the Woods came to stand at his side, it still felt like he was looming over us all.

First Prince Rozala rose to her feet, not even the generous cut of her tunic enough to hide how close to giving birth she was getting.

"I will begin by giving formal thanks to the Titanomachy," Rozala Malanza said, and then to the surprise of some offered a bow to Kreios. "If you had not lent your aid, we might not now be alive to thank you."

Some of her countrymen looked aghast at a First Prince bowing to a giant, but others were openly approving. The Titan studied her, then bowed his head back.

"Worthy causes ever find friends," the old gold rumbled.

He didn't mean to sound so deep, I decided, to have the sound of his voice resonating in our bones. But then did humans mean to breathe strong enough to move flies?

"An honourable sentiment," Rozala replied, sounding sincere. "In its spirit, may I ask what manner of spell was used to move us through time?"

Kreios glanced at the Witch, whose face of painted stone looked sternly at us all.

"It was not movement in the sense you mean," the Witch of the Woods told us. "A moment was severed from the flow and, once separate, made to begin anew. It was then joined anew to the flow."

Hierophant leaned forward.

"You mean that we lost an hour compared to the rest of Creation," Masego said. "Instead we repeated the same hour twice."

Kreios watched him.

"You have good eyes, Cutter," the god praised, "and witness much."

"There is so much to see," Hierophant smiled.

They might have gotten started on the magic talk if left to it, I figured, but we couldn't spare the time for that.

"Can you do it again?" I bluntly asked.

It was the Witch that answered me.

"Not without erasing most of the Kingdom of the Dead," Antigone said. "It will be centuries before severing causality here should be considered again."

Mhm, I'd figured it would be something like that. Power that useful never came without a price. An hour for a few centuries of silence, huh. Creation was more fragile than I'd thought, or perhaps more hard-handed in erasing mistakes. I'd moved the conversation back to practicalities, which had been my objective, so I didn't step into it again. Aquiline was the one who first put the cards on the table.

"Though we have taken great casualties," the Lady of Tartessos said, "I believe we all know the truth: if we do not strike tomorrow, we will lose this war."

There were grim nods of agreement, and then the inevitable hesitation. People wanted to wait longer, to let the men rest and finish healing the wounded. To make new plans to invest the city. It was Hakram that put an end to it.

"We learned the lay of the Dead King's defences today," the Warlord growled, "at great cost to many of us. If we wait, we throw those lives away: every hour that passes, the dead build new dangers to ruin us. *We cannot wait.*"

There was a *hear, hear* from Otto Reitzenberg that had a few Procerans cheering, Levantines loudly voicing their own approval. Eyes went to me, but I kept silent. It was Juniper who spoke for the Army of Callow, voicing her agreement.

"We can't wait," the Hellhound grunted, "but let's not kid ourselves about our chances either. If we don't have anything for the shifting city and that death trap in the inner city, then there's no point in attacking."

There the dwarves stirred.

"I believe I know where the ritual lies," the Herald of the Deep said. "Though I cannot stop it from beginning, I would lead my soldiers underground to end it."

There were some nods of appreciation.

"Keter's Due will begin to be fed into the secondary arrays long before the city begins to move," Akua said. "We need a way to deal with it first."

"The leading issue is the entropy trap," Chancellor Alaya agreed. "We cannot take the Hellgate and reach the Dead King without being able to push past the second wall."

"I will silence the power," Kreios the Riddle-Maker stated. "When soldiers reach this wall, I will go with them and keep this trap dormant."

There was a moment of silence, none quite daring to speak up after that. I cleared my throat.

"Then we have the bare bones of a plan," I said. "We will assault the city again, with Lord Kreios allowing us to push past the inner wall while the Herald and his army strike at the Dead King's ritual."

"That still means we have to take Keter again," Lord Moro of the Brigand's Blood grimaced. "The Enemy will await us, and there are no bridges left. We will depend entirely on sorcery to cross."

"No," General Rumena mildly said. "This is to be the last battle, yes? Then the Firstborn will lead the charge. All can follow in our wake."

It was enough of a boast that it had to explain after, but fewer questions were asked than one might assume. It had not gone unnoticed that I had not contradicted the drow general. An hour and change passed as tactics were argued and then the attribution of Named. The greatest change was that there would be no army sent out to do battle on the Ossuary: there would be no other chance of winning after this. We were all in, do or die. Remaining in my seat, I closed my eye and sunk into my Name. Let it wash over me, hands reaching into the void as I exerted my will to **See**. And I found it, exactly what I was looking for. It was right under my hand, almost eager to be taken up.

The last stories were falling into place, huh. Even Fate believed it would all come down to tomorrow.

When I opened my eye I found the Riddle-Maker staring at me. Hierophant had, Gods bless his soul, stepped between us in a gesture that could be taken as protective. The Titan wished me no harm, though. I knew exactly what it was that'd drawn his attention.

"You have stolen an eye from the Intercessor," the Titan said.

Silence fell, all other conversation dying. I reached for my pipe and took it in hand, stuffing it full of wakeleaf with well-practiced movements. I passed my palm over the mouth and pulled on a shard of Night, lighting it, and pulled deep. I let the burn linger in my lungs, the acrid pleasure of it, and spewed out the pale smoke. I was even nice enough not to do it on the back of Juniper's neck, merciful queen that I was.

"Taken," I corrected in a drawl. "It's been a habit since I was a girl, I'll confess."

The old god seemed unmoved by my words.

"And what did you find?" he asked.

"We're about to have a visitor," I smiled.

I wasn't tied into the wards, but I knew the mages that were: and each and every one of them shivered. A heartbeat later a silhouette stood in the middle of the circle. Tall and slim and androgynous, they had a spellwood sword at their hip and a long green cloak. Smoothly the unsheathed the sword, and though half the crowd reached for weapons I did not move. I pulled at my pipe, eye unblinking as the Emerald Sword plunged it into the earth. It met my gaze, face expressionless.

"We acknowledge the debt of the prince and the tower, Warden," the elf said. "We will honour the bargain struck."

I spat out smoke, making them wrinkle their nose, and inclined my head in a nod. They had better. I'd opened them a gate into Twilight from the room in the Tower they'd been stuck in, surrounded by goblinfire on all sides, at a price. When the time came for the Dead King to be brought at an end, the Emerald Swords would lend their swords to the cause. It'd taken me long enough to get them to acknowledge I had a right to be bargained with that I had gotten late to the bottom of the Tower and the tragedies it had in store for me, but it had been worth it. I had seen the might of the Emerald Swords, in Ater.

They would make a difference.

"I expected no less," I replied.

They didn't bother to answer me, or even address anyone else here. In a blink of an eye they were gone, the only proof they'd ever been there the dozen blades that'd been pulled and the length of spellwood that had been thrust into the ground. Eyes were still on me, but all I offered was a friendly smile. Always one more trick, that was the way. And I wasn't even finished pulling on that particular thread. I rose to my feet, then stretched and cracked my bones.

"I believe this war council can come at an end," I said.

"Do you have somewhere else to be, Your Excellency?" Ishaq drily asked.

"I'm going to start a cooking fire and find a stiff drink," I frankly replied, then cast a look at the rest of them.

Thoughtful looks, some amused ones and a few offended.

"Tomorrow's our wager with Fate," I said. "Make sure you're ready to face it."

As for me, I knew exactly who I wanted to spend my last few hours before the plunge with.



## Chapter 63: Farewell

*"A life without friends is a banquet without food."*

*– Proceran saying*

It was on a whim I took up a shovel and began to dig the firepit, but once the steel bit into the ground it felt right. Like I was doing something I could pour all of my mind into, enough to forget the blood-soaked day I'd waded through to get here. I'd not thought twice about where I began to dig, simply choosing somewhere relatively out of the way since I well knew there could be no hiding place in a military camp, and instead busied myself with the labour of it. Mantle of Woe tossed aside into the dirt, sleeves pulled up and hair held in bun, I shovelled clumps of dusty earth.

Vivienne was the first to come.

I didn't hear her approach – Princess or not, she was almost as light footed as when she had been the Thief – but I felt eyes on my back and turned to find her standing at the edge of the pit. She looked as tired as I felt, her pale green tunic hanging limp on that slim frame. There was still a sense of regality to her, though. She was not wearing the circlet that had become her right after she was raised a princess of Callow, but the loops of the milkmaid's braid gave the same feeling. Her face, though still sharp, had matured enough that her blue-grey eyes no longer seemed almost too large for it.

She looked like a queen in the making, a princess forged in the crucibles of the long wars we had spent half our lives fighting. There were days where looking Princess in the eye still drew complicated feelings out of me, but this was not one of them. Sweaty hand resting on the handle of my shovel, I found that today I found only pride. *We made it to the end, the two of us*, I thought. Caring about anything else just seemed unforgivably petty.

"You know," Vivienne Dartwick said, "even back when we were enemies, Catherine, that was the thing I admired about you."

I cocked an eyebrow, leaning my weight against the shovel.

"What's that?"

"You never balk at being the one in the pit," the Princess said, eyes unreadable, "getting your hands dirty."

I brushed a bang out of my eye, unsure how to respond, but in a blink of my eye she'd gone. Not for long, though. The Princess of Callow came back with a shovel of her own, that standard-issue tool of wood and steel of the Army of Callow we'd taken the

Legion pattern for. She leapt down into the hole, brushing her arm against mine, and took up a place at my back. Neither of us felt the need to talk, reluctant to break the comfortable silence of people who'd learned each other deeply enough not to feel the need to fill every void. Instead we dug together. It was easier work with two pairs of hand on it, one of those simple little truths that cast a broader shadow than they should.

Indrani came second.

"Wait, I have something for this," Archer mused, looking down at us from the edge of the pit.

"I feel as if am I about to be disappointed in many ways," Vivienne noted.

"Something something royals holding big shafts?" Indrani tried. "No, wait-"

She chortled.

"Royally shafted," Archer triumphantly exclaimed.

"Huh," I said, then flicked a glance to my side. "I might have to start calling you Prophet instead of Princess, Vivi."

"You barely even call me that," she muttered.

"I know," I sagely replied. "Won't even take much effort."

We might have kept at that for a while if a pile of dust hadn't been kicked in our faces. I covered my eyes – both of them, out of habit – even as Vivienne began to cough and spit out the bits she'd swallowed. When I looked up, I found the afternoon sun shining at Indrani's back as she scowled at us and wagged a finger.

"Don't flirt when I'm trying to annoy you," she chided us. "It's rude."

"I feel like no one ever taught you how to flirt and we've all been paying for it ever since," Vivienne told her.

Wow, I thought, sending her an admiring glance. That'd been a little savage.

"'Cause you're known as a great mistress of the subtleties of seduction, Dartwick," Indrani skeptically replied.

Vivienne cocked an eyebrow, then turned towards me. She leaned close hand coming to hold my neck from the back, and even as she pulled me close she dipped me down. This was, I mused, embarrassingly close to a daydream I'd entertained once or twice back in the day.

"Catherine," Vivienne gravely said. "Let's slay your enemies in battle, drink too much table wine and then ignore important paperwork to have a tryst on your desk instead."

I blinked, then turned to shoot at a look at a befuddled Indrani.

"She's hitting all the right notes," I admitted. "Damn, maybe you *should* learn from her."

Indrani scowled and kicked dirt into our faces again, which alas had the mistress of seduction dropping me unceremoniously so she wouldn't be made to eat dirt quite literally for the second time. Though this was a foul betrayal I recovered from the disappointment and got back to my feet, just in time to see Vivienne smugly smiling at Archer – who seemed unable to decide whether she was irritated or amused. It was a good look on her, brightening the hazelnut eyes her darker skin and green scarf already made pop out. Indrani had always been beautiful in moments, those stolen heartbeats where she was so incandescently *alive*, and between the sun and the smirk pulling at her lips this was one of them.

It passed, and I reclaimed my wits.

"So what'd you come here for?" I asked. "It better not be kicking earth back into our firepit, 'Drani, or I'll be cross."

"Been going around getting my hands on bottles since you got the ball rolling," she said, "but they're running out and no one wants to sell theirs anymore. I need your seal to crack open you army's last crates."

I grunted, not entirely surprised that I wasn't the only one intending to drink myself insensate tonight. It'd been a dark day and tomorrow didn't look much brighter, plan or not.

"Take whatever you need," I shrugged.

"Already tried that," Indrani idly said, "but you changed the lock. Tell your phalanges to help, would you?"

Wasn't hard to find one of the adjunct secretariat's officers looming around – there was always one kicking about wherever I ended up, a habit Hakram had instilled them – and I got that sorted, sending Indrani back on her way. By the time I returned, Pickler had shown up. She was pacing around our pit, muttering under her breath, and almost ran into me. Her head would have reached higher on my body than I cared to admit.

"Have you started talking to yourself?" I asked. "Because they don't let you get away with that without there being *talk* until you're a priestess, in my experience."

"Yes, yes, all hail the Crows," Pickler dismissively replied. "May the Matrons perish trying to bite a chunk out of them, preferably after I've gotten good seats to watch the whole thing."

"Your faith is touching, Sapper-General," I drily replied. "I'll pass the word along."

"You do that," Pickler told me, then poked my chest with an accusing finger. "Did you know your pit's half a foot too deep and nowhere near large enough? We're cooking pigs, not digging a tunnel."

"We're not finished yet," I defensively.

"I was just following orders," Vivienne called out from below, the treacherous weasel.

"You should have taken the engineering classes at the War College instead of that useless stuff you picked up instead," Pickler told me.

My brow rose.

"Tactics and Strategy?" I drily asked.

"Yes, those," the goblin told me, undaunted. "Haven't tactiqued or strategized your way into digging a proper firepit yet, have you Foundling?"

I opened my mouth to object, then closed it. I raised a finger, tried again, then my teeth clicked closed under Pickler's satisfied yellow gaze.

"Just tells us how to dig," I finally sighed.

"An hour late, but there's only so much you can expect out of humans," my Sapper-General allowed.

"I'm going to write you up for discrimination, High Ridge, see if I don't," I muttered under my breath.

We were nearly done making something to Pickler's satisfaction when Aisha showed up, legionaries carrying cart of firewood following in her wake. I took the opportunity to drag myself out of the pit, wipe my face with a cloth and guzzle down water from a skin. I was even generous enough to pass it to Vivienne afterwards, though not so generous I didn't do that by throwing it at the back of her head. The noise it made hitting her was most satisfying. Aisha watched me with laughing eyes, her lovely heart-shaped face pulling into the hint of a smile.

"Juniper's gone to pick out the pigs herself," she told me. "She'd having fun dickering with the Fourth's quartermaster for Vale hogs."

Famously the fattest meat in Callow, which had me salivating already.

"Archer's handling drinks," I said, "but have we got anything except the meat on the way?"

Dark eyes moved to study me with sudden intensity.

"Kilian," Aisha said with deliberate nonchalance, "offered to get a cauldron of dirty rice going."

Rice mixed with oil, onions, tomatoes and up to half a dozen other ingredients depending on where in Praes the recipe came from – apparently Wolofites added bananas while Aksumites swore by ginger. Mind you, it was the dish that had her looking at me like I might be on the verge of biting her nose off. Kilian hadn't been at one of these since we'd parted ways, at first because she'd declined invitations and later because I'd stopped asking. I honestly wasn't sure how I felt about her trying to get a foot back in now, but I didn't have the heart to refuse her. Not tonight of all nights.

"That'll do," I nodded. "Remind her to get the cauldron here early. You know how territorial Juniper gets when the pigs are on spits."

"It's rather endearing," Aisha agreed with a fond smile.

Not exactly what I'd been getting at, but uh – good for her? I finished the pit to Pickler's exacting specifications and then left her to haranguing legionaries into putting the firewood in the right sort of stacks, helping Vivienne out with a hand that she'd didn't particularly need.

"We could probably use a wash," she said, taking a sniff at the both of us.

I wiggled my eyebrows.

"Trying to impress anyone?" I teased. "Thought you were one of those chaste maiden kind of princesses, Dartwick."

"I've thought about it," she admitted. "There are some men I could see myself taking to bed with an assurance of discretion."

"Might be our last night," I quietly told her. "We have a chance, Vivienne, but there's nothing certain about this. Take your comforts where we can."

She smiled at me.

"If it is my last night," Vivienne said, "then I would rather spend it with the lot of you than with a stranger. It'd be a greater comfort than a lay, however pleasurable."

"You say sweet things, sometimes," I smiled back.

"You really need to bathe," Princess then told me, wrinkling her nose.

I sighed. I couldn't even blame her for that entirely. I'd trained this into all of the Woe, because... I blanked. There must have been a reason at someone point, I reassured myself. *Surely*. I was still desperately trying to recall what it might be when I took my friend's advice and began to limp towards my tent, where I was due a wash and a nap.

—

I woke half an hour before dusk, pleasantly refreshed. I splashed my face with tepid water to finish clearing out the last dregs of sleep, then pulled on a clean black tunic and took the time to sit and massage my bad leg for a while. It wasn't throbbing as badly as I'd thought it might after the battle I'd been through. It could have been-

*Get them all home, Catherine.*

My stomach clenched. My throat was dry. And a heartbeat later I dropped my leg with a hiss of pain, the marks on the skin where my fingers had dug in red and visible. I'd forgot, just for a moment, why it was I'd gone to dig a pit. My friend was dead. Roland had been taken by an arrow that had been meant to kill me. Why else the poison that reacted to Night, the very power I would have called on to lessen my wound? Akua had been shot too, and there had been no poison in her. With the Varlet destroyed last year and the aspect that had made this thus lost, it was likely too rare to be used any way other than sparingly. Neshamah had meant to kill me and come so very close. *I need to be better*, I thought, fingers clenching. *More careful. To see the next one coming.*

Or else more friends than Roland de Beaumaraais would get killed trying to keep me alive.

I put on the Mantle of Woe, more for the comfort of its weight than a need for the warmth, and slipped out of my tent. It was a childish thing, to flee the place where the dark thoughts had come, but I indulged them impulse anyway. I didn't feel like talking with the two phalanges that began to walk behind me, or with anyone at all, so I briskly turned a corner and pulled down a veil of Night to cover me. I shook them off, limping deeper into the Army of Callow's camp, and let the noise of my soldiers wash over me.

There was a frenetic energy to the camp. It wasn't quite despair – we'd taken a licking today, but we'd still gotten deep into the city before retreating – but it was a cousin of sorts. Every last of my soldiers knew they could die tomorrow. Some of them remembered dying today, saved only by a Titan's will. No one wanted to be alone tonight, or leave things undone they might never get the chance to finish. Stashes of liquor and smokes were being blown through, grudges being settled or set aside and then the opposite of grudges: more than a few of my soldiers had snuck off into dark corners to fuck with someone who'd caught their eye, or even simply someone that was there. It felt like the aftermath of a summer fair, only without the good singing voices.

There was some theatre though, I found.

Some bold souls had decided to spend their last night in Keter's shadow putting on a trick play, which had drawn a large crowd of legionaries in varying degrees of inebriation. The Barber and Edward play was putting them in a fine mood, and it was loud laughter that'd drawn me there in the first place. I stood at the edge of the crowd, listening in, and found the premise hadn't changed. It was still about the cunning goblin sergeant Barber, whose beauty drew suitors like moths to the flame, and the grim squire Edward whose strokes of good luck always ended undone by his need to get even with his enemies. As was customary, between the two of them they got in a lot of mockery and dead foreigners which was exactly the kind of play my soldiers were in the mood for.

I was still taken aback by the sheer fucking audacity of it when I saw a goblin with bones glued on try to get to Barber to read her poetry only to get his head cut off by Edward – only for another bone-wearing goblin to pop up at the edge of the stage and try again. Those were, I realized with a shocked grin, the fucking *Dead King*.

"I would love you forever, beautiful star without a rival," the goblin Dead King crooned.

"Not even if I were dead," Barber scathingly replied.

Edward cut off Neshamah's head again, wiping his brow exaggeratedly afterwards.

"We've been at this all afternoon," the squire complained. "Maybe you should reconsider the suit, Queen Barber has a ring to it."

Barber, who had not known the Dead King had a kingdom before, then hatched the plan to marry him and immediately bump him off so she could inherit Keter. It devolved quickly into slapstick humour as a bunch of heroes tried to crash the wedding only for their attempts to kill the Dead King to get in each other's way and prevent Barber from speaking the vows. I was halfway to

leaving when I noticed that the priest that had been about to officiate the wedding was suddenly dragged off stage, replaced by someone with a fake beard. Someone with a staff and a tattered cloak of many colours. The goblin Dead King peered at 'me'.

"Have I met you before?" he asked. "You seem familiar."

"Never," the Black Queen replied. "Unrelated, but do you have any particular weaknesses someone might use to kill you for good?"

The Dead King's yellow eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's part of the traditional Callowan wedding ceremony," the Black Queen lied.

Two goblins dressed in black popped in behind her, cawing their hearts out as they flapped the wings of large wooden crows that they made perch on the Black Queen's shoulders. She batted them away in a panic.

"Coincidence," the Black Queen assured the betrothed. "I must have had some seeds on my cloak."

The crows kept coming back, though, forcing her to make increasingly tortured explanations, and with a grin I pulled on Night. The next time the crows flew off, I replaced them with two feathered apparitions I'd woven out. The Black Queen actress stiffened and the crowd stilled.

"Nothing to see here," I made one of the crows say.

"We have invitations," the other one insisted.

The sound was so sudden it was like a sharper had just blown: the roars of laughter approval drowned out everything else, a quarter of the crowd looking around to see if they might find me. I was gone before anyone got too enterprising, though, disappearing into the avenues.

I had a fire waiting for me.

—

Most of them were already there when I arrived.

Juniper was turning her spitted pigs and loudly arguing with Vivienne about whether 'catapults' could ever be legitimately be an item in a royal budget, though I couldn't help but notice that unlike the way it would have been a few years ago the two of them were smiling. Aisha and Masego were playing shatranj as they sipped glasses of wine, Indrani draped over his shoulder and giving him terrible advice he was duly ignoring, and Pickler was



halfway through a mug of ale larger than her head as informed the lot of them that goblins had a game like shatranj, only the rules changed and you could get stabbed if you lost. Indrani looked worryingly interested.

The sight that had me shuffling in discomfort, though, was Kilian of Mashamba leaning over her cauldron of dirty rice with a long spoon in hand as she calmly spoke with Akua Sahelian. I'd never seen them together before, and hadn't quite grasped how much taller than her Akua was – Kilian was barely taller than me, after all. I slipped in close before I could get noticed and got to eavesdrop a bit on the conversation.

"- and Ratface used to put saffron in it by the handful, which was *odious*," Kilian was saying. "He was a deft hand with chicken dishes, but not a man you wanted anywhere near rice."

"We have a family recipe with fried peppers in it," Akua told her. "A few generations back, one of my kin actually had another assassinated over-"

Golden eyes found me, and I forced nonchalance as I approached them. Kilian looked hesitant when she noticed I was there, her fair face closing, so I limped closer to lean over the cauldron and breathe in the vapour.

"Smells good," I said, clapping her shoulder.

I would have lied if it didn't, but I hadn't had to.

"Rat Company recipe," Kilian replied with a relieved smile. "They used to teach us in our first year."

I blinked in surprise.

"I never was never taught it," I pointed out.

"I would surmise you also never had to cook, darling," Akua amusedly said. "Did you not become company captain within days of first joining?"

"It was Ratface's idea," I pointed out, perhaps a tad defensively.

"Of course it was," Akua easily smiled.

I narrowed my eye at her, only then noticing the startled look that Kilian was giving the both of us. It left me feeling strangely naked, so I excused myself to grab a drink instead of lingering. The strangeness quickly faded, leaving me instead to sink into the warmth of the company I was keeping. I spent most of my time bickering with Indrani about whether or not some poet I'd never heard of should be considered a classic – absolutely not, I'd never heard of them – and stealing pieces from the

shatranj game that Pickler had insisted she would beat Aisha at since she'd beaten Zeze. Since the good lady Aisha Bishara ensured my glass stayed full, in an act of brazen quid pro quo I ensured that her pawns never stayed more than two turns off the board when they were taken.

It got bad enough Masego started to cheat *against* her, which naturally drew Indrani into it and therefore utter chaos.

I was grinning up to my ears by the time Juniper declared the pigs were ready, a signal that the traditional ritual was about to begin. We all gathered with our plates as the Hellhound began making her cuts, as usual beginning with the naked favouritism that was Aisha getting the first place the best pieces. Masego cocked his head to the side.

"Why is it that she always goes first?" he curiously asked.

Juniper turned a gimlet eye on him.

"She's the only one of you lot that removes headaches from my life instead of adding them," the Marshal of Callow growled.

"Oh, that seems fair then," Zeze plainly agreed.

As usual, the use of Masego's most dangerous weapon – sincerity – disarmed his opponent without contest. Not so much that she didn't slap Indrani's hand away when she tried to carve out a piece from the side of the pig, though. Still, looking at them all I could not help but feel something was slightly wrong. The last time we'd done this, in Hainaut, there'd been... Ah, I thought. *There'd been Hakram*. He had been invited, Gods of course he'd been, but he was also the Warlord and our camp was not the only one lit up tonight.

"Ah, just in time."

I turned and coming out of the cold were two silhouettes. One I did not recognize, an orc with long fangs and scarred-up shoulders bared by the leather tunic she had on. Big girl, shorter than Juniper but noticeably broader. The other one, though, was a prayer I'd not voiced answered. Hakram stood easily on his prosthetic leg, a loose coat fur over his tunic, and offered me a smile.

"I don't suppose you have two more plates?" the tall orc asked.

"I think we'll find some lying around," I smiled back.

"Sigvin!" Indrani called out. "Though he might drag you here. Come on, sit with me."

Ah, so that was who. Sigvin of the Split Tree Clan was, if Archer was to be believed, the closest thing Hakram had had to a lover

in the time we'd known him. They didn't keep to each other's bed only, she said, but she was sticking around and he didn't seem to mind at all. Bet it had something to do about the scars, I mused. I still remembered how wild orc girls had gone over his after he scrapped with Vivienne and the Lone Swordsman. Sigvin's face betrayed no nervousness, but there was something of it in her stance. There were, I supposed, a lot of famous names gathered here tonight. She stepped forward, though, and after offering me a curt bow pressed two bottles into my hands.

"Aragh, Warden," she said. "A gift for your fire."

I met her eyes solemnly.

"Where have you been all my life, Sigvin?" I asked.

That got Indrani laughing, and Aisha as well, which bled some of the tension out. Hakram shot me a knowing look as he passed me by, gently brushing his shoulder against mine in unspoken thanks. I sat with him, Akua by complete coincidence happening to sit on my other side as Juniper finished doling out her cuts and we settled down to eat. With full bellies and plenty to drink, we settled down around the fire and the conversation remained lively. I let myself be drawn into a debate by Vivienne about whether or not the Exiled Prince would have been able to beat the Barrow Sword in a fight-

"Absolutely not," I firmly said. "Ishaq's ridiculously hard to kill and he can even use Night now."

-but afterwards I took step back for a bit, pulling up my pipe to indulge in wakeleaf as I watched them. It was a balm of the heart to see them like this. Masego idly playing with Indrani's hair as she rested her head on his lap, Pickler drawing something in the dirt that Aisha and Sigvin were look rather skeptically at, Juniper looking appalled as Akua told her about secret Tower histories and both gestured animatedly in the firelight. Vivienne was chatting with Kilian by the pigs, the redhead tracing a few symbols of light in the air that the Princess was shaking her head at. Slowly, I felt something loosen in my gut as I pulled at my pipe and blew out a stream of smoke.

"I missed these," Hakram quietly said.

I'd heard him coming, but we had kept silent until now as I watched and smoked. There was no sense of hurry to the air.

"I'm glad we got to do it before the end," I murmured. "It wouldn't be the same, going into the dark without first having sat by the fire."

He slowly nodded. I was seated and he standing, the two of us apart from the rest. It was a familiar feeling, though somewhat bittersweet.

"Tomorrow," he began, then trailed off.

"There'll be the battle," I said. "And then after. When that time comes..."

"I'll find you," the Warlord said. "I can still feel it, you know."

I glanced at him, found his face pulled tight.

"The pull," he elaborated when I said nothing.

My lips quirked.

"And this surprises you?"

He did not answer, which was as good as an admission it did.

"I told you, Hakram Deadhand," I said. "When the Woe will fight, where would you be if not with us?"

*I meant it*, I did not speak out loud. *You're still one of us*. He stayed silent for a long time.

"I will not be the Warlord forever," he suddenly said.

"You'll need to step down eventually," I agreed. "Else they won't know how to be without you in charge."

He nodded.

"When that day comes," Hakram gravelled. "I-"

I raised a hand, interrupted him.

"Don't feel like you have to make that promise," I said. "Wasn't that the point of all this?"

"You should have let me finish," he snorted, baring fangs in amusement. "I could think of worse places to retire to than Cardinal."

It wasn't quite an offer, I thought, or a promise. But it was something. There was a lump in my throat I couldn't quite swallow, so instead I took his hand. The dead one, the skeletal fingers that he'd come into fighting for me. I squeezed them and he squeezed them back. I sighed, closing my eye, and for a moment allowed myself to lean my head against his side and rest. It wasn't the same it used to be, I thought.

But that didn't mean it couldn't be good.

—

When it all wound down, when everyone was drunk and began to fall asleep around the dying fire, after Hakram and Sigvin had gone, I still sat wide awake. Vivienne was snoring under a blanket and drooling on a log, Pickler draped over her and somehow not awoken by the racket. Juniper and Aisha were whispering softly in a corner, Indrani had gone off to get water for an unusually dead drunk Masego to drink before he fell asleep and I found myself with Kilian of Masham standing before me. She had not grown any less beautiful in the years since we'd parted ways, I thought as I watched the paleness of the moon caress her skin and light up the green of her eyes.

"Thank you," Kilian softly said. "For saying yes."

I could have pretended I didn't know what she was talking about, but it would have been unworthy of the both of us.

"They're your friends too," I said. "I wouldn't keep you from them on a night like this."

Her lips quirked in a rueful smile I knew well.

"And us, Catherine?" she asked. "Are we friends?"

I could have told her that I'd once offered her that and she had turned it away, but the bitterness of that would have left a poor taste in the mouth. It was a done business, done long ago at that.

"No," I honestly said. "But that's the choices that were made."

She nodded, and I found her face hard to read.

"I suppose we aren't," Kilian agreed, then glanced at the others. "It'll get cooler out, later on."

I cocked my head to the sight. Her eyes found mine, steady.

"It would be warmer in my tent," she offered, and I stilled.

We both knew what she was truly offering, and it would have been a lie to say I wasn't at least a little tempted. She had, after all, not stopped being beautiful. And I had fond memories of her behind closed doors, for all that had come after. But it was only a passing thing, soon gone. It was, as I had just thought, a done business. Pretending otherwise would be sweet, for a time, but it would be a sickly sort of sweetness.

"I've gotten used to the cold," I gently replied.

To my surprise, she smiled.

"I didn't think you'd say yes," she admitted.

I cocked my head to the side.

"Then why offer?"

"The terror of an entire continent," Kilian teasingly said, "and still some things about you are the same as when you were fresh out of Laure."

I was still in too good a mood to get irritated, but she was headed in that direction.

"For old time's sake," Kilian said, "I'll tell you one thing, Catherine."

She paused, then looked away.

"You never looked at me the way you look at the Sahelian," the redhead told me. "Do yourself a favour and own it."

She raised her hand to touch my shoulder, but she must have seen something on my face and she aborted the gesture. With one last faint smile, she took her leave and left the cast of the fire's light to vanish into the camp. I sat there, resting my cheek on the palm of my hand, and sighed.

"Eavesdropping?" I said.

A moment of silence, then a smooth gait on the dirt until she came to sit by my side. Close enough to touch, yet not touching. Years made into a sentence, that.

"You started it," Akua replied.

I rolled my eye but did not argue. We were both had bad habits in that regard. The silence that lingered after was not tense, but neither was it easy. It felt like the moment before a blade was drawn. And in the end, it was not me who cleared the scabbard first.

"Will you?" she asked.

"Will I?" I replied.

Golden eyes found mine.

"Do yourself a favour," Akua said.

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. I did not answer.

"No," Akua murmured. "I don't think you will. There's too much of who you are invested in holding that last redoubt."

I did not look away.

"So you won't," Akua slowly said, "but neither will you stop me."

Her hand cupped my cheek, tenderly, and she leaned forward. I closed my eye, felt her lips move against mine. It was soft but the softness kindled a hunger, and I would have bitten her lip and leaned in had I not held on to that last redoubt. But I did, she leaned back. Her breath was soft against my lips.

"I am not sure," Akua whispered, "whether that was love or cruelty."

My eye still closed, I felt her rise to her feet. She brushed her hand against my neck, my shoulder, and then suddenly the warmth of them was gone.

"Neither am I," I admitted.

She was gone when I opened my eye.

I stayed there for a long time, sitting there in my silence.

—

Though it was late and the night was at its deepest, I did not crawl into my tent to sleep. Instead I rose and slipped past the sleeping bodies on the floor, past the people I loved most in the world, and headed deeper into the shadow. Past the last fires to be lit, the last watching eyes that a twist of Night ensured slid past me without seeing anything. I did not have a destination held firmly in my mind, instead trusting my feet to get me where I needed to be. One of the old Fairfax kings had once said that the evening before a battle was like an entire nation breathing in, and I felt the truth to the words. For all that the camp had gone still and silent, there was palpable sense of *something* in the air.

But we were still in the moment before the end began, and so there was room enough for one last conversation to be had.

I found her waiting in the shadow of a watchtower, leaning against the side as a slice of moonlight cut across her face. The Ranger had been beautiful once, and perhaps still was, but that beauty had been marred. She still held the burn scars of Summer flame on the side of her face, but also fresher ones. Still red and raw, three cuts: one across the nose and two down her cheeks. The parting gift of her last pupils, the children of Refuge that had risen against their terror and teacher. They'd left her broken on the floor of the Tower as goblinfire burned behind, her

fate entirely in her own hands. We'd all known, deep down, that it would take more than that to kill her.

I limped forward, Mantle trailing behind me as the moonlight shone down on my hair, and the half-elf's dark eyes flicked to me even through the veil I had yet to cast down. It was no longer needed, though, so with a flick of the wrist I abandoned the working.

"I've been expecting you, Hye Su," I calmly said.

"I did not," the hard-eyed woman said, "give you leave to use my name."

I hummed, unmoved, and cocked my head to the side.

"But the Name you want me to use instead," I said, "isn't it feeling a little loose in your grasp, nowadays?"

I felt it then, the will to kill me. An intention so strong it felt like Creation would bend to it, just like the first time I'd met this monster when I'd been a girl who didn't know better. I did now, though. And I was no longer that girl. I leaned forward, smiling, and pit my will against her own. For a moment it was as if two ships were colliding, but then in the heartbeat that followed there was a *crack*. And it was not me that'd given. Ranger drew back into herself before it could turn worse, face giving away nothing, but her body was not so silent. She was, I found with amusement, wary.

How long had it been since she'd come out the loser in a game like this?

"Better," I mildly said. "Now make your offer. It's why you came for, isn't it?"

She pushed off the side of the watchtower, the slice of moonlight expanding to swallow half her face. How very unfair it was, I thought, that she was beautiful enough the cut on her cheek seemed more like a tattoo than a blemish.

"I want a trade, Warden," Hye Su said. "An oath out of you."

"And what manner of oath would it be?" I asked.

I already knew the answer, but it needed to be said.

"A duel," she said. "You and me. Ten years from now."

I thinly smiled.

"Am I to rejoice," I asked, "that I have become worth hunting?"

Her face tightened with sudden, poisonous anger. It startled me.



"No," Hye Sue coldly said. "Not that. Never that, for you. This isn't Ranger business."

Ah, I softly realized. It wasn't the Named that had come tonight, the legend. It was the woman.

"You want to kill me," I said.

"If you die now Calernia might break," she said. "And if it's just after the war, it'll be more trouble than it's worth. So I want an oath that, ten years from now, you will come to me for a duel to the death."

I breathed out a laugh.

"Indrani didn't think you'd take revenge," I told her.

"He did it to himself as much as you did," she said. "I know that. And that it's not a good fate in the making, killing you. It'll bring too much down on my head."

"But you don't care," I slowly said.

I was, I would admit, fascinated by the cold flame I saw in the other woman's eyes.

"But I don't care," Hye Sue repeated, the quiet of her voice a deep grief. "I loved him, Warden, in a way that can't be replaced. That time won't change. I loved him and you killed him. So in ten years, one of us will die."

Looking at her, at the gaunt cast of her face, I believed it at last. That in her own strange and twisted way, Hye Su had loved Amadeus of the Green Stretch just as deeply as he'd loved her. Enough that she was breaking the rules that'd kept her alive through centuries of fighting Named and monsters, enough that she was willing to risk being hunted by entire kingdoms. This might just be, I realized, the first time I had ever liked the Ranger since first meeting her. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"You said this was a trade," I reminded her. "Should I take this oath, what would you offer in exchange?"

She met my eye, unflinching.

"I know," Hye Sue, "a secret way into Keter. Take the oath and I'll show it to you."

And there it was, the last piece that'd been needed before it all fell into place. Before we brought an end to this endless war. I stood before her, our silhouettes draped in moonlight, and after a long moment I offered my hand. She took it, fingers digging into my wrist, and we shook on it.

I gave her the oath and she gave me a way past the impassable.

## Interlude: Legends I

*"Thus they gave oath;*

*To war 'til the ends of the earth*

*Relenting not to love, dread or hearth*

*To league of hosts or pious chant*

*Until dominion returned to Levant."*

*– Extract from the 'Anthem of Smoke', widely considered  
the founding epic of the Dominion of Levant*

It was time.

Yara of Nowhere could still feel that much even after that vicious child had torn away her eyes. The ragged eyeholes of what she had once been – all the stories she had been able to **Narrate** – still remained, like a drunk groping for a bottle in the dark. So she went to one of those places that were not really places, where no feet could take you, and beheld the lunacy of a single man tying the hands of an entire Choir. A faceless, implacable sea held back by a stubborn dam denying it the right to pass. Forbidding the fish to swim, judgement to judge. Was there anything in the lay of Creation more impossible to break than pure, genuine conviction?

The Tribunal saw her, for she was not hidden. The Hierarch, little more than a burning swath of will and indignation, could see nothing at all. A stroke of luck, for in this state the merest trace of his attention would force her to **Wander** away – that nasty little authority of his would make her open her own throat otherwise, going through with the sentence the League of Free Cities had passed on her. That she was no longer of Aoede if Nicae didn't seem to matter in the slightest to the authority's boundaries, even though the right to pass judgement over her had been bound to the face. The Hierarch had always been a fucking headache of a man.

Yara would have reached for her flask if she could in this empty and too-bright place.

"Thought I'd come help you out of your spot of trouble," Yara told them.

Agreement. Impatience. Curiosity. Why had she not come sooner? It was her purpose.

"All in due time, my darlings," she told the Tribunal. "Besides, you can't kill him."

Dismay. Anger. The Seraphim felt shallowly but broadly, like an ocean three feet deep. Even after several millennia she was not sure why they had been made to feel at all. There was a time she'd thought they might once have been like her, learning just a little too much about the underpinnings of Creation to be allowed to muck about by the Gods, but she'd since stumbled over proof they had been created. Her best guess was that even limited emotional capacity improved their ability to learn and adapt to the ever-changing mores of mortals. Compassion had once been Reverence, after all. Like Role and Name, the essence could not change but the manifestation must adapt.

Yara wagged a finger at the angels.

"You know the rules," she said. "You're no longer being called and he's not exactly attacking you – keeping you locked up's not the same thing. I can't just put my finger on your side of the scale and let you turn him into dust."

Reluctant agreement. Yara could, but she had been lying to angels since before men knew how to forge iron.

"Of course," Yara grinned at them fondly, "it doesn't mean I can't play favourites. I've got a way for you to get rid of our little friend here without stepping over the lines."

Elbow in the side, a nudge and a wink. Stern disapproval from the Tribunal. They really were such bores, one of the many reasons she'd never gotten along with them. Their heroes tended to be fascinating, but the old birds themselves? Terribly tedious.

"Now now," she mused. "Don't give me that guff. I'm here to help, yes? Now, our old buddy-"

She did not speak either name or Name. She knew better.

"- can't be bumped off, but you *can* do the opposite," Yara told them.

Caution. Confusion.

"You can resurrect him," she said.

Immediate anger. A reward, a prize, when the man was undeserving? Not fond of the idea at all, which was no surprise when it ran contrary to their nature. That was fine. She'd talked so many ancient monsters into their deaths she'd forgotten most of them.

"You're insisting on thinking of it as a reward," Yara of Nowhere said, clicking her tongue, "but does it have to be? Think of it not as bringing him back but as *moving* him."

Caution again, but they were listening.

"Exile," she smiled. "That's a punishment, isn't it?"

Reluctant agreement. And the trick here, was that they were going to have to rely on her. Because the Tribunal only did one sentence – yes or no, the flip of the coin – so for nuance they needed a mortal anchor. And with theirs out of their reach, no longer the White Knight and changing in his convictions, they couldn't afford to be too picky. And Yara, for all her... imperfections, was here.

"We'll send him somewhere out of the way," she told them, smile broadening. "A Hell, yeah? Let him do Above some good dying."

Caution remaining, the thought more nuanced than most they possessed.

"Sure, it wipes you out for a day," Yara shrugged. "But you melted his body, it's on you to make it again. And what's better for Creation: silence for one day before you return in full, or remaining silent until the Last Dusk?"

It was no choice at all. Choirs could tolerate idleness for long, it ran against the fundamental purpose. Playing them wasn't like manipulating someone with a soul, it was more like a jigsaw puzzle: move the pieces around the right way and it'd all click into place as inevitably as the rising of the sun.

Agreement, the Tribunal expressed.

Yara of Nowhere grinned, laying hand on the essence of them.

"Let me take care of that for you," she said.

**Guide**, her soul sang, the authority seizing the underpinnings of Creation. One nudge to get the angels free past, one nudge to keep his eyes away from her and one last nudge to ensure he'd end up where she needed him to be. That was the most terrible of her powers, in truth.

Knowing the right place and the right time.

—

He landed in the grass.

It was soft against his bare feet, and though there was no sun in the sky above there was no lack of light. The breeze had him pulling his frayed diplomat's robes close on his haggard frame, eyes blinking numbly as he realized he was seeing again. With his own eyes. He was breathing with lungs, shivering with skin. There was the scent of dung on the wind, and somewhere ahead a long field of barley. Beyond it, at the edge of the horizon, he

glimpsed the sloping silhouettes of a village. People. His mind was open, never to be closed again, and so he could not help but **Receive** the sight of them.

He had seen this place before. Green land stretching in every direction, an endless expanse of villages and fields and rivers. Men and women and children that never went far from the place of their birth, taught that they were to be content and peaceful with mother's milk. There were no dangers, no dooms, nothing to fear in the Serenity. Only one beautiful day after another, until one day you breathed your last and the Fair King called your mortal coil to the Lands Beyond. Some would have called it a paradise, a place without sickness or war.

Anaxares the Diplomat called it a lie.

The middle-aged man raised his hand, felt the breeze slip through his fingers and slide through the last of his sparse and greying hair. It was baked into the bones of this place, the insolent will that claimed itself supreme master of all that dwelled under the empty sky. He could feel it pressing down on all that dwelled here like an unseen sun, a tyranny so subtle and ancient it was no longer known as anything of the sort. But Anaxares was a son of Bellerophon, born under the stele, and he knew tyranny. It was not in his nature to suffer it silently.

The fingers closed around the breeze. His Name roused, groggily opening an eye.

"All are free, or none," the Hierarch told the empty heavens. "I will suffer no compromise in this."

His aspect lit up, and like ink in water began to spread. Spreading through the grass and the wind, the morning dew and the dim light of nowhere at all. **Indict**, the Hierarch had ordered, and the command burned away at the will holding this realm in thrall like acid. Breathing out, the old diplomat pulled at his loose robes and took a tentative step forward. The grass was wet against the sole of his feet, but it was no unpleasant. He still remembered walking well, he'd done much of it... before. So Anaxares took a second step, towards the fields and the village beyond them, feeling his aspect seep into the ground beneath his feet.

And where the Hierarch tread, serenity shattered.

—

Dawn rose over Keter, silent. Like a breath sucked in. Banners rose, armies moved and horrors stirred. Thousands knew, deep in their bones, that this was the last pass.

And so the Warden broke the Sword of the Rest over her knee, freeing Below's stories at last.

—

The Firstborn had not begun at the forefront of this siege.

In some ways, General Rumena was thankful for it. The First Under the Night was showing consideration for the losses at Serolen and the great war for its borders, restraining her expectation and preserving their strength. It was a kindness. But part of it had been displeased, even as the Firstborn were relegated to guarding the camps under cover of dark and protecting the wardstones during the day. They had not fought, had not bled as the armies of the humans had. The war of the Firstborn had been waged very far away, far from the eyes of cattle, and their might doubted because of it.

This morn, as the sun rose over the Burning Lands, Rumena the Tomb-maker would put those doubts to rest.

Mighty clustered around it, those with the strength to see and to shield, and as the first rays of light scoured the sky the old general sat surrounded by a ring of obsidian and steel. It sunk deep into itself, into the embrace of Night. Deep enough that darkness swallowed it whole, as if it had stepped into the abyss. It breathed until it no longer felt the need to, the faint and distant sounds of thundering sorcery colliding against Night slowly fading away. Its will sunk into the ground, like the roots of an ancient tree, and as it breathed out it unleashed the Secret of Stone. Not as it had in Hainaut, fighting in the tunnels, or as it had in Serolen when fighting under the sky.

Instead it gripped the tides of the earth and moved with it.

Power flowed through its veins, raw and urgent, but Rumena gave a crooked smile as it opened its eyes. Even as it rose to its feet the ground shifted under them. It did not need to look to feel the movement, the bridges the Hidden Horror had broken sprouting anew. Stone and earth jutted out, charging across the chasm that made Keter an island even as spells fruitlessly tried to stop the assault. A bridge formed, then two. Three, four, five – Rumena stopped only at then, still keeping the Night clutched tight against its breast as it began to march forwards.

The Enemy came for its life with reckless hate. Storms of sorcery, arrows and bolts and every nasty trick the Pale King had learned over its many years of darkness. But what did that matter, when the finest of Mighty stood at the Tomb-maker's side? Magic died in the dark, like a candle guttering out. Arrows were swallowed like delicacies, stones plucked out of the air like toys. Sigils burned around the general, Mighty laughing at the Enemy's impotent wrath. And so it came that Rumena stood before

the last gate of Keter, a mass of steel and sorcery set in great towers of stone.

It laid a hand against the steel, feeling the enchantments within try to bite at its skin.

"A strong gate," Rumena praised, looking up. "Crafted cleverly, its magics mighty."

The old general laughed, revealing crooked teeth.

"But it is set in stone, Dead King," the Tomb-maker said, "and I hold in my hands the secret to it."

It struck out, knuckles hitting the steel. The might rippled across steel, the sound of it like a gong struck, and twice more Rumena the Tomb-maker knocked at death's door.

On the third strike, the gates fell.

The stone it was set it crumbled to pieces, dust in the wind, and the enchanted mass of steel fell on the dead behind it with a loud thump. Dust kicked up and General Rumena met the eyes of the horde waiting behind.

*"Before nine years have passed,  
Keter's gates will lie broken  
as trembles Death's holdfast."*

It had taken an oath in the lands of Procer, sworn the sigil of the Rumena upon it. At last it stood fulfilled. It took a step forward, the ground shuddering under its feet, and around it the Mighty leaned forwards like wolves hungry to fall upon the fold.

"Chno Sve Noc," the last general of the Empire Ever Dark laughed.

"Chno Sve Noc," the Mighty shouted back, and Night sang with them.

The Firstborn had not begun at the forefront of this siege, but they would end there.

—

The Mirror Knight moved quickly, for a man his size in heavy plate, but as Named reckoned it he was slow. Hanno had learned to match his pace to the other man's, as it would not do to leave him behind. He was, after all, serving as Christophe de Pavanie's bodyguard. The Dead King had to know of the Severance by now, of the blade meant to slay him. And while the Hidden Horror might know better than to try to destroy something fated to slay him with his own hand, there was another way to ensure the blade never reached him.

Killing its wielder.

"It rankles," Christophe suddenly said.

Hanno slowed in his step, falling by the other man's side as they halted beneath a half-crumbled wall. A row of houses had been brought down into a makeshift barricade here, eventually collapsing into a ragged hill of rubble. From here, they could see the fierce melee ahead. The Lycaonese vanguard was tangling with skeletons, shouting war cries in Reitz as they tried to swiftly shatter the enemy's ranks. The Proceran thrust into the city through the same gate as yesterday was to be entirely about speed: like an arrow loosed or a spear thrust, all the way to the inner wall.

"What does?" Hanno asked.

"That we do not fight with them," the Mirror Knight said. "We could save lives, Hanno."

The dark-skinned hero grimaced. That was true. But it was not the plan for a reason.

"We won't win the battle in the city," Hanno frankly said. "We cannot. Everything we do is to get to the Dead King and end this. That means-"

"That the Severance and its wielder must reach him," Christophe curtly said. "I know."

The Mirror Knight sighed, fingers going for the sword at his hip that was a mundane blade – at least compared to the one forged out of the Saint's aspect in the Arsenal.

"But it rankles," he repeated. "It feels like we're abandoning them."

Christophe was not the only one who felt that way. Named had not been entirely pulled out of the armies, but they had very much been thinned. Most of them had been placed in bands, roving to put down Revenants and find the Scourges, while a few others had undertaken particular tasks. The Warden herself had taken a band for such a purpose without giving an explanation except for a knowing smile. Catherine Foundling, Hanno had thought, was becoming unpleasantly fond of vagueness.

"Once we reach the inner wall we'll have fights of our own," Hanno said. "Most of us after the Dead King, but there will be other duties as well."

"There is no chance of either of us returning to the battle," Christophe bluntly said. "You must know this."



Hanno did not disagree. They were both too useful to be spared for any purpose but the destruction of the King of Death.

"I know," Hanno quietly said.

And it rankled, but what else could he do?

They began moving again, shadowing the Proceran advance, and the man who had once been the White Knight could only pray there would be anyone left alive in Keter by the time the Dead King ended.

—

Basilia had stormed the walls of Keter once before, but the horror of that day was a candle to the bonfire before her: though they were not even an hour into the battle, there was no longer a Penthesian army.

The Empress of Aenia watched the ragged remains of the soldiers and mercenaries the Exarch had scraped together for the campaign flee down the avenue, the undead leisurely loosing arrows at their back, and felt her heart clench with fear. Her forces had pushed past the Tombmaker's bridge and the shattered gates in good order, clearing a foothold in the lower city, but that had been as far as the armies of the League got. What should have been a hard push into the enemy's capital was instead turning into a desperate holding action, the enemy pushing in on all sides with frenetic intensity.

Basilia had claimed a tower as her forward headquarters, deciding the higher vantage point was worth the risks of attack as long as she had mages to protect the place, and looking down at her offensive she could already see the first signs of collapse. On her right flank the Delosi were already buckling under the pressure, the citizen levy and mercenaries losing ground as the flood of undeath came at them relentlessly. There were spurts of flame and poison whenever the *krixilia* threw themselves, the swollen ghouls full of burning oil and foul alchemies scrabbling as deep into the Delosi ranks as they could before exploding.

On her left flank the Stygians were holding, as much because the Spears of Stygia were as unflinching as any dead as because the Seventeen Schools of Atalante had finally taken the field. The priest-philosophers, a bunch of ragged and quarrelsome fools at the best of times, wielded Light as a painter would a brush: it curled and twisted, forming into arcs and elegant sweeps as it cut a burning swath through the dead. The Atalantians would tire, though. And when they did, the dead would again prove that a phalanx could hold them back but not *beat* them. That was the source of most her troubles, in truth. She spat through the window, seeing the faces of her generals were as grim as hers.

"If we are kept bottled up any longer," Empress Basilia bluntly said, "we've lost."

Grunts of agreement.

"Those small streets are murder on the mercenaries," General Pallas said. "Their equipment's too irregular to be able to hold proper formations."

A problem that afflicted some of the cities more than others. Delos and Atalante had always heavily relied on mercenary armies to prop up their own mediocre hosts, and though Penthes usually boasted a decent force under professional generals that army had been melted into scraps during the conflicts that had afflicted the League since the beginning of the Uncivil Wars. Even Nicae, whose armies had checked Helikean and Stygian conquerors for centuries, had been forced to bolster its ranks with sold swords after the... war of succession that had dethroned the Trakas.

"We need to push further up avenue before they rout," Basilia said. "Once we have, it, we can sweep around and cut off the flow of reinforcements that's keeping us penned in."

"The Penthesians just tried that, Your Majesty," General Alexios flatly said. "It was no great success."

An understatement. The Dead King's commanders had barred the way up the avenue only irregularly, leaving room for the League to advance if it could break through the barricades, but that was because they'd turned the ground into a slaughterhouse. Houses had been collapsed along the length to turn the avenue into a funnel, and then further back collapsed again to turn into platforms for archers and catapults. The strategy at work was simple enough, after that. Keter had scraped together thousands of dead in armour wielding spears and arrayed them in heavy blocks.

And when the Penthesians had charged, trying to break through, the undead had begun firing mass volleys. They didn't care about hitting their own soldiers, just about filling the air with arrows and stones. The Penthesians had bravely fought, breaking through two squares even through heavy fire, but they had dropped like flies. Fed into the meat grinder, they had been spit back out as bloody bones. And now, even as the last of them fled to the safety of allied ranks, the two blocks of spearmen they'd chewed through were replaced as armoured undead smoothly advanced.

They stayed there, silent and waiting.

"If we do not break through," Basilia darkly replied, "the Proceran offensive will be at risk of being enveloped."

And they could not afford that. Though the Grand Alliance was pushing into Keter from every direction, only two pushes were meant to make it to the inner wall: Rozala Malanza's and High Marshal Nim's. The other offensives were meant to cover their flanks and allow them to deliver the assets that would keep the Dead King from killing them all with this nightmare city and the sorcery that moved it. The Titan Kreios was with the Procerans, which meant their push could not be allowed to stall. The ancient Gigantes might be able to go at it alone, she knew, but it would be a risk. If he were to be slain then they would all follow.

There was something different about today, Basilia thought as her generals began to bicker over ploys that might take them up the avenue. The Hidden Horror had always been a fearsome opponent, but the tactics he employed today were... aggressive. He was no longer aiming at victory but instead at extermination. The Empress chewed her lip. *He fights like a cornered man. What happened?*

"- of course we need someone to march up the avenue, but there's no army that *can*," Alexios harshly said. "That much sustained fire is a guaranteed rout. We need to-"

"- a swift thrust forward is the only way, getting stuck is death. We should-"

It was Basilia's wandering eye that saw the first sign of it in the troops below. The shift of the Nicaean back ranks, pressing closer to the beleaguered Delosi. A commander was making room for troops to press forward. Who? Though she had noticed from up here, officers closer to the ground must have as well. Basilia turned as a young man in standard scale burst into the room, paling at the sight of his empress and a gaggle of generals. He knelt, his bushy hair flopping around as he did.

"You have a message," Basilia stated.

It was not a question.

"Captain Calista reports that the Republic is on the move," the young man replied. "She sent a runner to demand an explanation and was charged with passing an answer the Protector of the League."

Bellerophon. What were the madmen up to?

"Speak it," she ordered.

The young man nervously cleared his throat.

"By a majority of seven thousand four hundred and fifty-nine to three thousand one hundred and sixty-four, as well as eight abstentions and three invalid votes, the Republic of Bellerophon

has voted to serve as vanguard of the League. The Protector may proceed at her leisure."

There were some laughs behind her, but Basilia did not share the mirth. She stilled instead, eye turning to the moving soldiers below.

"Ready all our forces," the Empress of Aenia said. "I want our foot ready to follow behind them."

"You must be jesting, Your Majesty," General Myrine frowned. "The rabble will taste a volley and rout. They-"

"They voted on it," Basilia cut through curtly. "They *voted* on it, general. It doesn't matter if a hundred or a thousand of them die on the first salvo. So long as they have legs, *they will keep walking forward.*"

She barked out her orders. The Nicaeans were to reinforce the Delosi, keep the flank from bending too much, but Helike's full must was to prepare for the push. And, ignoring the protests of her generals, Basilia Katopodis put on her helmet. She would not leave her men to fight alone. Sweeping down from the tower as her retinue trailed behind, she found her horse and mounted quickly. Already, ahead of her, she saw the Nicaeans moving out of the way for the advancing ranks of the Bellerophans. They were, she thought, so very close to being a mob.

The equipment was old, the manuals obsolete and most the officers drawn by lot. Some spears were tipped in iron or bronze instead of steel, the armour was a simple tunic of mail and their shields were of an oval shape no one had used in a few centuries. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to who had been added to the levy. Some of them stooped from old age while others couldn't be older than thirteen, tall and short, limping and hale. None of them were soldiers, not really. It was a sea of farmers and bakers and masons that'd put on armour, none of them really trained. And as the frontline approached the killing grounds where the Dead King, they halted.

"Shields up," officers called out. "Spears down."

The citizens of the Republic of Bellerophon obeyed in disorder, almost laughably so, half of them beginning with the spear instead of the shield. And then, unhesitating, they began to march up the avenue.

Death answered.

Basilia's knuckles turned white as she clutched her reins tight, seeing the score of deaths the first volley caused. Ballistae and catapults ran red furrows down the lines, arrows fell like rain and even a few streaks of sorcery burned through men like smoke.

The Bellerophans slowed, closed ranks, and resumed their advance.

It was madness, Basilia thought. The Republic's army smashed into the first block of skeleton spearmen gracelessly, its own soldiers barely more skilled than the dead, and burst through even as catapults crushed entire knots of men with ever stone and smoke was blown into their faces.

After the third block of spearmen was shattered, stones were rolled down into their ranks from the heights on both sides. The wake of the great stones looked like bloody clawmarks from where Basilia stood, as if a monster had slashed through the ranks, but without flinching the Bellerophans did the same as they had from the start: they slowed, closed ranks, and resumed their advance.

Through hail and storm and smoke, through arrows and crossbows and javelins, through screaming ghouls and snakes with the faces of men, the Republic of Bellerophon advanced unflinching. It plodded forward like a donkey pulling a plough, steady and so terribly unhurried. A hush had fallen over the battle at the sight of it, even war cries petering out at the sight of such atrocious bravery.

Close to eleven thousand Bellerophans had begun the march up the avenue. When the army reached the last barricade and clumsy hacked it down, barely two thousand were left. And when they were done, when their walk through ruin ended and they finished what they had set out to do, the citizens of the Republic did not shout in triumph or scream boasts at the sky. Instead they offered the hordes of the Dead King the casual contempt of utter silence as they simply turned around and began their march back.

They'd achieved what they had set out to, after all. What else was there to do?

Empress Basilia watched them, that battered host of indifferent lunatics, and a laugh bubbled out of her throat. In their eyes she saw a light she had seen before, in those of a man she had never liked but had learned to respect.

"They still do you proud, Diplomat," she murmured. "Wherever you are, know that."

And now it was time for the Empress of Aenia to do her part. The Bellerophans had cleared the way, and behind Basilia stood Helike's finest ready to dance with death. Not so much as a single slinking ghoul would reach the Proceran flank, if she had anything to say about.

Unfortunately for the Dead King, she did.

"HELIKE," the Empress shouted, raising her sword, "WITH ME!"

—

Akua was becoming used to being handed godheads, a sentence that she would have been skeptical of even at the age of seventeen when she'd genuinely thought the world was hers for the taking. It was sadly typical of Catherine to keep tossing her the keys to divinity like they were loose change from her pocket. Also as usual, the unthinking display of trust had Akua at war between feeling tenderness and fury.

It was quite vexing.

"Hells, Hakram's in a mood today," Archer grunted.

The golden-eyed sorcerers cast a look at the fighting in the distance, where a torrent of orcish warriors was tearing through dug-in defences as if they were sandcastles. At their head the unmistakable silhouette of the Warlord in his scorched plate was leading the charge, crushing everything in his way in a display of pure rage that reminded Akua of the reason her Soninke ancestors had learned to build enchanted city walls.

"His assault with the Levantines failed yesterday," Akua replied. "He has something to prove now."

Indrani grimaced.

"He's not the only one who has things to make up for," she said.

Akua laid a light hand on her companion's arm, but as she had expected Archer was not hungry for comfort. Though the sorcerers found it absurd that Indrani blamed herself for not being in Keter to check the Hawk yesterday – she'd been with the League armies out in the Ossuary, as the Scourge had fought there until then – the Woe tended to embrace unearned guilt that they simply refused to be talked out of. It was endearing in the way that a three-legged cat might be. Somewhat charming, but likely to get them killed one of these days.

More unfortunate was that Akua had begun to dislike the prospect of them getting killed, which did her no favours.

Archer shook her head, shaking off whatever thoughts she'd been contemplating to cast a wary look around them. Akua had been keeping them under illusion as they moved from rooftop to rooftop as much as they could, only dipping down to the streets when they must, but there was no telling if the spell was enough to trick the Dead King's many watching eyes. It was why they were staying relatively close to the offensive of the Clans, and near the avenue where the Praesi push under the Black Knight would take place. The chaos should keep attention off them.

The Autumn Crown that Akua carried strapped to her back in an enchanted container was risky to carry with only her and Archer for escort, but it would have been even riskier to keep it with an army. The Dead King was bound to be looking for the weapons forged to destroy him.

"Come on," Archer said. "We need to keep moving."

Akua nodded, adjusting the straps going down her back to ensure she wasn't going to *drop a godhead on the ground*, and follow her friend.

—

As a child, Sargon Isaru had seen the face of Greed.

The Isaru had not been land-kings in centuries, their city swallowed by Istar's ever-expanding borders and turned into a district of the capital, but the family was powerful still. Vast wealth and closeness to the Hall of Hearths had made them more influential than many who could raise armies with a stomp of their feet. There were some who would have been satisfied with this. The Isaru had not been, hungry for wealth and power and praise. For anything that might raise them above their rivals for the King Under the Mountain's favour.

So they had sought to build a Great Forge, and why not? Their ancestors had been famed smiths once, known for clever devices, it was in their blood. And owning the thirteenth of the Great Forges would bring great prestige to the Isaru, as well as great profit when they began selling arms to the most belligerent of the land-kings. As for royal favour, Sargon's mother had decided on a bold stroke: to dedicate the Forge to the god that within the king even before he passed and freed that divinity to stand with his divine kin. It was heretical flattery, but the man was not known for his humility.

Greed, Sargon had thought even as a child, it was all Greed. That deep and unrelenting longing that lay coiled in the heart of all dwarves, moving them to take and keep. A disease if left unchecked, but also if too tightly held back: you could go mad by denying your Greed entirely. Turn into a feverish animal that knew no reason, eating flesh and murdering for colourful pebbles. Noble families, good blood, must master their Greed. It was a sign of poor breeding, poor character to do otherwise. But Sargon had thought, hearing the older folk talk, that there was nothing mastered about this Greed. It was quiet and subtle, like a poison, and they had all drunk deep of it.

When the crust of the earth was punctured and the magma poured out, the Soul of Fire that angrily rose up was older than any had suspected. One of the old leviathans come close to the border between stone and fire. Sargon was there with the family when it

rampaged, tearing through bindings as if they were clay and slaughtering thousands before it was driven away. A disaster that turned all the greedy hopes of the Isaru to ash in a single stroke as swaths of their district burned and dwarves choked to death in smoke-filled tunnels. Sargon learned a lesson about Greed that day, but not only that of others.

For in the moment where the Soul of Fire emerged, the silhouette of fire and smoke from the burning depths of the Deepest Sea, his mind could think of only one word: *beautiful*. The spirit was beautiful and he had wanted it, craved it in a way he would never crave anything or anyone save for Balasi. That awakening of his Greed, he often thought, had been the first step on his road to become the Herald of the Deeps.

"Delein," Balasi whispered. "We are there."

Sargon's hand left his beard, which he had been stroking lost in thought. His lover – husband, soon, for who was left to stop them? – had the right of it. They had dug through the night, cracking open one of the old tunnels sealed with molten steel in the earliest efforts to contain the Dead King, and then pushed through tunnels until they reached the edge of the gap. Over the centuries, Keter had dug so deep in search of metals for its armies that what had once been a tunnel at the bottom was now halfway up to the surface. The Herald of the Deeps eyed the smooth stone across the gap, still dimly feeling the pulse of power lying within.

"It is the right place," Sargon said. "Beyond that stone lies the chamber where the magic comes from."

"Our bridges are ready," Balasi told him, "but it would be suicide to begin mining our way through."

He watched his lover curiously, enjoying the sight of the skulls against the other man's beards, and followed Balasi when he was led to the edge of the gap. Following the other man's eyes below, he saw the source of the doubts. *An army*, Sargon thought. How many thousands of dead were down here, spread out among tunnels and depths? That and dark creatures, great white worms large as towns and flocks of cavern-bats turned into... something else. The Dead King had been waiting for them.

"We can't hold the bridge," Balasi quietly said. "Even if we take part of the army down to hit them as a distraction."

"If we do not snuff out the ritual," Sargon said, "the battle is lost."

And perhaps Calernia with it.

"A blind pickaxe is no one's friend," Balasi grunted.



The old saying was open castigation, though mitigated by Sargon's faintly amused knowledge that neither of them had spent so much as an hour of their lives swinging a pickaxe.

"I will act," Sargon said.

Balasi's face creased with worry.

"Without your staff-"

"It is my Burden, delein," Sargon gently said, laying a hand on his arm.

Balasi pulled him close, into a soft kiss, and after they stayed close with the foreheads against each other.

"I know," the seeker-of-deeds murmured. "I know. But you're not as strong now and he'll be coming for you."

Sargon looked away.

"I am not sure," he said.

Balasi uncomprehending eyes found his own.

"Was it truly a loss, breaking my staff?" Sargon quietly asked.

His lover seemed about to say as much, but he bit his tongue. Sargon shook his head.

"We strike," the Herald of the Deeps said. "Tell the men."

Balasi sought his eyes, then slowly nodded. His fist rang against his armour in salute before he hurried away. Sargon stood at the edge of the tunnel, looking down. So many, he thought. And so deep. There might be opportunity there, the Herald thought, but he was not strong enough to take it. He knew this, objectively, by the ways he had been taught. Without the staff and the bound spirits within, Sargon could not tear open the earth. Only... *Are you seeking change, or just to add a rung below you on the ladder?* Nothing words from a child reeking of angels, he had been ready to dismiss, but then Sargon had looked in the White Knight's eyes and seen faith.

It had burned then and it burned now.

"So I wonder," Sargon murmured, "have I made the mistakes of my mother, of the Isaru?"

Had he thought himself the master of his Greed, only for it to poison him unseen? It had all begun in that moment, he often thought, when the Spirit of Fire burst through the ground. And oh, how Sargon had wanted it.

"How many of you did I take?" he said. "Dozens. I called you and bound you, hung you from my staff like ornaments."

And now that he no longer had the strength, now that he thought of those clear eyes and burned with shame, Sargon wondered if he'd ever mastered anything at all. He breathed out and his Words unfurled, resonating with Creation, and he felt the call to the Deeps being heard. As a child, Sargon Isaru had seen the face of Greed.

Perhaps he had been a child still all these years, to be facing it only now.

"Please," the Herald of the Deeps said. "I cannot bind you, cannot master you."

His fist clenched. And he never would again. He would not keep making rungs below his own.

"I can only ask," Sargon whispered. "So please – help us."

His words sunk into the Deepest Sea, below the burning waves, leaving only ripples. Sargon waited, watching and hoping. The depths remained dark.

And then they shook.

Like an anthill kicked, the dead began to swarm. The ground below them cracked, split, the earthquake shattering the stone. And light came, of light came when magma erupted in a fountain. Dead burst into flame, ran, as the Spirit of Fire roared its wrath. A small one, young, and still Sargon felt his throat tighten with shame and joy. It had come. He had not deserved it, but it had come. His Words rang again, and the Spirit of Fire sang back.

"Yes," Sargon said with a smile. "Together. Let us teach them who the deeps bel-"

The depths shook again. He froze. And again, and again, and again, until the darkness below Keter burned red as the ancient scream of Spirits of Fire shattered stone. Small and large, old and young, they had come. Not one but dozens. And as magma swallowed hundreds of dead, as the air filled with twisting heat, the burning waves shivered. Something was swimming below. An old one, the leviathans of the Deepest Sea. And when it burst free, turning stone into flowing rivers, Sargon stilled. For he had seen it before, this Spirit of Fire. Long ago, when he took the first step down a road.

"Beginning," the Herald of the Deeps softly said, "to the end. Were you with me all along?"

A song, a harmony more beautiful than anything he had ever heard. And when Sargon Isaru looked at the ancient spirit, he saw beauty again – but nothing more. The Greed was gone, and the Herald wept. The Spirit sang, comforting, and he laughed through his tears.

“No,” Sargon told it. “They are good tears.”

*We can learn*, he thought. *We can do better.*

“Then let us,” the Herald of the Deeps smiled, and his Burden unfurled like a flower under the sun.

His hands rose and the Deepest Sea rose with them, devouring armies whole.

—

It had not been difficult to find people who would help her.

Though the fortified camps surrounding Keter were slowly emptying of soldiers for the last, desperate assault on Keter it was impossible to truly empty a war camp. So Cordelia had discreetly reached out for those soldiers she knew were most likely to stay behind, had convinced them of the necessity of what she was to do, and now the moment had come. The guards around the angel corpse, the ealamal, were already hers. That had been part of the terms of her abdication to Rozala Malanza. Now their ranks were swelled with Lycaonese and Alamans veterans – most Salians and Rhenians – as dug in positions were raised around the weapon.

Other soldiers were cleared out, a clean line of fire for crossbows established by pulling down any tents and shacks that might serve as cover, and Cordelia Hasenbach stood in silence as the few mages she'd secured began putting up the heaviest wards they could. She had not reached out to Named, even knowing some might be sympathetic, because it was sure to get to Catherine. The Warden was as a bloodhound for this sort of thing when it involved her charges, but there were simply too many soldiers for even Catherine Foundling to be able to keep an eye on all of them.

“It will smack of betrayal to some,” Simon de Gorgeault quietly told her.

She did not turn to look at the man who had once been one of her spymasters, then her Lord Inquisitor, and was not the last of her lieutenants. Brother Simon had no intention of leading the Holy Society once more, Cordelia had known that for some time, but he was still burning a bridge by standing with her today. First Princess Rozala would not forget it, or others more distantly worrisome.

"We will not step a foot beyond the ward lines," Cordelia evenly replied.

"Even so," Brother Simon told her.

He was right, she knew. But she would not take the risk. The fair-haired princess had the artefact that could command the ealamal, an angel corpse swelled with so much Light it purified the air around it just by existing, but that would not matter if the ealamal itself was seized. So she would ensure it was not, even if it had the look of betrayal to some. In truth, Cordelia would admit to herself, they were not entirely wrong to see it as such. She was taking on an authority today that had not been bestowed to her by anyone, because there simply wasn't anyone who *had* that right.

"Then I will answer for this," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "if we all live through the day."

Her duty had not changed. She would keep her eyes open and her hand at the ready, because for all the valour of the Grand Alliance there was no certainty of victory today. And if the siege of Keter was lost, if the Dead King's armies triumphed, then she would do what she must before the dead overran the camp and seized the ealamal. Before anyone, living or dead, could stop her.

If she must burn half of Calernia to save the rest, Gods forgive her but she would.

## **Interlude: Legends II**

*"The army of Tenerife encamped by the banks of the Blue Ribbon, making fires, and the sight of their multitude troubled Theodosius' captains. Daphne of Penthes, most respected among them, argued that they should seek aid from Nicae rather than give battle. 'They are as many Procerans as there are grains of sand,' she said. Theodosius refused. 'Then like so much sand we will scatter them before us,' he replied."*

*– Extract from 'The Banquet of Follies, or, A Comprehensive History of the First League War' by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis*

The Warlord charged, and all that stood before him shattered.

His shoulder hit a shield wall bristling with pikes and blades and he broke straight through, a tide of warriors pouring in behind him as the dead were swept away by the wrath of the Clans. He did not slow. Ghouls burst out of the ground, buried under the rock, but his footing was sure and they were all frail. His axe

swung and flesh gave, blood spurted, screams filled the air. Hakram felt his blood thundering in his ears like the beat of a drum. Felt the rhythm echo in the fifty thousand souls trailing in his wake as he roared, leaping up to smash a beorn's leering maw with his shield. The beast fell and he hacked at its flesh, discarding the shield when it took too many arrows and roaring again as his axe split the beorn's skull and the creature fell.

Great stones had been pulled into the way as chunks of wall to stop their charge up the avenue, monsters in the shape of massive corpse-fat snails released swarms of poisonous flies from their bone shells and skeletons the height of then men scythed through ranks with massive hammers, but it was not enough. The drow that had broken the gates for him, still shadowing his armies on the sides, filled the air with fire and curses that ate away the swarms. The Warlord's steel fist hit the stone in front of him once, twice, thrice – and on the third the stone shattered in two. They clawed and pushed their way through, tearing into the dead as swarming the great skeletons until they were toppled down and taken apart on the ground like wounded beasts.

Yesterday he had failed to take the gate, left Catherine and the Procerans to hang, but today the Clans would remind Calernia why it had once trembled at the coming of a Horde.

The world was slowly turning red. The Warlord saw only in bursts, as if he was flitting in and out of consciousness, his Name carrying him like a river. **Lead**, it sang, and so the warriors of the Clans thundered down the avenue with him. A Revenant stood before him but he shoved his dead hand down the throat and ripped off the head from the inside, its fangs clattering uselessly on his scorched plate. Magic came down from above in curtains but he charged through it, sorcery dripping on armour like rain, and once through he barrelled into the enemy's retreating ranks. A wyrm spasmed across the avenue, swarmed by the silhouettes of Mighty, as the Warlord and his warriors pulled it down with ropes and harpoons.

Then it was a hulking shape of steel, a great armour held together by the dead remains of a Name. The Prince of Bones shattered the tiles under them with a stomp, but the Warlord only roared as his axe dented the sternly frowning mask covering the Scourge's face. It was strong as a monster was strong, the sweeps of its broadsword whistling through the air but still too slow. The Warlord stepped around the blows and struck, hacking away at the layers of steel until his axe was little more than scrap, and after that he caught the Scourge's arm to take its own greatsword. Only when it came to strength he was outmatched, the Revenant unmoving as the Warlord's feet were pushed back through broken tiles. The Warlord roared again, but from the corner of his eye he saw the Scourge's free hand moving. A slap, he

thought, that would be enough to spill his brains all over the stone.

Until it was caught, a stooped old drow shivered into existence and grabbing a single finger.

"My turn," Rumena the Tomb-maker said, and struck with its free hand.

The Warlord grunted with effort, holding the Prince of Bones in place so he could not avoid the blow, and there was a great scream of metal before a wet crunch. The orc watched with muted disbelief as the Scourge's head, a ball of metal, toppled to the ground. *But there is no bone*, the Warlord saw. The head was a decoy. A heartbeat later a mass of lightning came down on their heads, the Tumult's hatred unleashed, and even as Rumena formed a sphere of Night around them the Warlord felt the Prince of Bones slipping away. He struggled to hold the Scourge in place but the Prince's might was implacable and his fingers scrabbled down the steel, until at last they found purchase.

When the storm of lightning ended and the Tomb-maker ended its working there was no trace of the Prince of Bones, but Hakram Deadhand held in his grasp the Scourge's own greastword as a prize. Dead fingers closing around it, the Warlord began to feel the red bleeding out of him. His breath slowed, and he began to feel the collection of wounds that covered his body.

"They retreated to the inner wall," Rumena said.

"We're close," Hakram replied, and was surprised to find that true.

They had pushed two thirds of the way up the avenue, far faster than he'd believed they would.

"Can your sigils take the rampart, Deadhand?" the drow general asked.

"No," he admitted with a grimace. "We don't have the siege for it. Once we hit the inner city we'll head north, try to link up with the Praesi."

"I will leave sigils behind," Rumena nodded.

"And you?" Hakram asked.

The creased old Firstborn grinned, the ochre and gold on its lips pulling up.

"I hunt," the Tomb-maker replied.

—

General Abigail Tanner had been looking for the way out since she'd come in and it had been a little disheartening when she'd realized all the possibilities were literal dead ends. With her luck the bloody Dead King would get her, too, and unlike the Black Queen didn't even have the decency to pay his officers. Stuck fighting forever without even a retirement fund? She'd rather die.

In, uh, a different way.

This whole Keter business had been awful, really. Not only were the soldiers in between her and Revenants dying at a frankly alarming rate, but for some reason the Third Army kept getting into the worst of it. It was like being forcefully saddled to a horse that kept looking for cliffs to leap down from. Even Boots, her perfidious old ass of a horse, didn't intend to go down with her when it tried to shake her off to her death.

Abigail couldn't even blame him for that. The horse had correctly figured out she was the reason he kept getting into situations where people shot at him, so in a sense she *did* have it coming. The part of this mess that absolutely did drive her up the wall, though, was she'd somehow ended up leading the vanguard of the Army of Callow again. How, when? She'd tricked General Holt into taking the lead this time and *somehow she was still at the tip of the spear again*.

"It must be a curse," she muttered. "I know I haven't gone to a sermon in a while, but isn't that why you bribe the Crows?"

"You said something, ma'am?" Staff Tribune Krolem asked.

The bulky orc looked at her expectantly.

"I was asking about the word from Marshal Juniper," Abigail hurriedly replied.

"She commends you on the initiative and gives you free rein to lead the Third forward as you please," Krolem proudly said, flashing his fangs.

*Fucking Hellhound*, the dark-haired woman uncharitably thought, hanging her a length of rope and surely it was a coincidence she was already standing next to gallows. Abigail had long been aware that the world was unfair – come on, you only had to see how well Ellie Bilkers had married while being such a witch to know that – but it was a little much to find out that even now the world wasn't unfair *in her favour*. She was a noble now! Lady Abigail Tanner, even if the name was one she'd come up with in a panic when she'd realized she'd procrastinated until she was due to give an answer to the adjunct secretariat. Not only some noble but a general on top of it too!

She should be going around in goddamn palanquins all the time while people threw themselves at arrows to bring glory to her name. Instead she was stuck going around on a miserable old horse, under a banner like she was just asking to get shot, and-

Panes of magic flared into existence, glowing blue, and caught the three crossbow bolts that would have punched through her skull.

Abigail wished she could say it was even just the tenth time the dead had tried that today. At this rate she'd die a porcupine and they'd bury her as bloody Lady Arrowcatch. Krolem, Gods bless his soul, began shouting and growling until mages blew up the rooftop she'd been shot at from in a volley of fireballs.

"I think it was as a Revenant this time, ma'am," the orc said with disturbing eagerness. "Think it might have been the Hawk?"

Abigail figured not, on account of her distinct lack of arrow in the head, but she figured she'd let him have his fun.

"Could be," she grunted. "Now, Tribune, what was it you were telling me about the League's push again?"

The Grand Alliance strategy for the assault was straightforward, looked at on a large scale. There were four gates, one for every cardinal direction – wait, was *that* why the Black Queen was naming her mad city out in the mountains Cardinal? Shit, she'd just got that, why had no old told her before? – and there would be four thrusts at the inner city through them. Thrown on top of that was the breach in the southwestern wall that the Ram had built, which was the way through for the Army of Callow to do their own push.

Most of those attacks weren't actually meant to reach the heart of Keter, in practice. The Procerans through the south gate and the Praesi through the north one were the 'lucky' winners that needed to get there, the rest of the attacks elaborate manoeuvres to get the pressure off their flanks. The orcs and the drow were coming in from the west, the League from the east, and the Dominion was to follow after the Praesi and serve as their rear guard.

The Army of Callow's role was pretty simple: die over the same grounds as yesterday long enough that the Proceran left flank couldn't get smashed by there.

"They were delayed, general," Staff Tribune Krolem replied. "They ran into an entrenched position and were stalemated until the Bellerophans cleared it."

The *Bellerophans* had cleared it, Abigail skeptically thought. Well, she supposed if you had to throw corpses at corpses you



might as well go with the folk that voted on chamber pot schedules.

"So they're staggered a bit, is what I'm hearing," she muttered. "It happens. The Warlord's pissing all over the opposition on the other side of the city, so I reckon it evens ou-"

Abigail's mouth closed. Beneath her, Boots began to edge closer to the wall hoping she was distracted. She pulled at the reins to disabuse the treacherous beast of the notion. Please, he'd tried to throw her at one headfirst already. Like she'd forget. *My memory is at least twice as good as a horses', you fucker*, she smugly thought. Yet the warm glow of her triumph retreated in the face of the ice that was welling up in her stomach as she tried to look at what the assault on Keter would look like from above.

She had no idea how well the Praesi were doing, but most their fortresses were still in the air so presumably not too badly. The Procerans had been doing pretty well too, their Lycaonese vanguard taking the hits for the rest of the army stoically so the conscripts wouldn't start routing too early. But if the League had been delayed on the Proceran right flank and the Army of Callow was getting stalled short of the avenue on its left, then something was up. And now that Abigail thought about it, weren't the orcs actually doing a little *too* well?

"Shit," Abigail cursed.

The Procerans were getting baited to pull ahead of the protection on their flanks. There was room enough to hide an army in the space between the League thrust and the Proceran one, if you kept the League out of the avenues for long enough, and the little voice that had kept Abigail alive through too many hellholes to count was quietly asking a question: if the Warlord's been doing so good 'cause he's smashing only half an army, then where's the other half?

Now, if Abigail had been trying to kill all of the Procerans she'd do it like this: bait them up, encircle them, then throw a bunch of expendables in the way of the forces that could relieve them. After that it was just a matter of hammering at the Principate's back for long enough that the levies routed and their formation went to shit. Considering the League was still far and the Army of Callow closest, that meant... The general went over the positions in her head, jaw tightening.

The Fifth under General Holt was trying to breach the barricades around the avenue head on while the First under General Bishara was going around by the west to flank the position, which meant the flanking force that'd pulled ahead to the east to begin flanking the barricades that way was the one that'd get those expendables thrown at.

"Krolem," Abigail said with calm that she did not feel. "Have goblins scale the houses to the east. I want to know if there's a force headed our way."

There was already fighting there, of course, but those were loose bands of dead. The Staff Tribune hurried off as Abigail leaned over to pretend she was patting Boots' mane, when in fact she was reaching for her saddlebag and getting out a flask she quickly took a few deep swallows from before putting it away. The brandy burned down her throat, even as panes of magic flared into existence again. Five arrows this time, huh. She was going to find out whatever mage it was that'd made this ward after the war and thrown gold at them until they made one she could carry everywhere at all times.

Krolem came back grinning, a sight that had been the herald of many a misery in Abigail Tanner's life.

"Battalions of heavily armoured skeletons and some mage cabals," the Staff Tribune announced. "They're moving to hold our right flank."

No, Abigail grimly thought, they were moving to prevent the Army of Callow from intervening when the Procerans got surrounded and butchered to the last. Like pigs in a pen, only fancier because Procer. Wine, maybe. Almost certainly cheese.

"I need someone to get to the Fourth Army," Abigail said. "General-"

Only, she realized with dawning horror, though the Fourth was behind her Third to serve as a reserve and so it'd only be right they take this on instead of her, they were too far behind. And though they were technically closer to the avenue that went from north to south across Keter, that wasn't where the reinforcements would need to be. They'd need someone covering their left so they could pivot their entire army to face the enemy coming from the right. Which meant the Third. Which meant her. And she couldn't even try to pass this off to someone else, because the Hellhound had just granted her permission to 'lead the Third forward as she would'.

Balls, she realized. If the Procerans all died and she could have intervened, she'd probably get court-martialed for it. Which meant losing her pension, and Abigail of Summerholm had not come out all the way to *fucking Keter to lose her general's pension*.

"Krolem," General Abigail sternly said.

The orc straightened up.

"Ma'am?"

"We're pushing east," she told him. "Our entire force. Someone tell the Fourth, we've got a greater good to pursue."

"Saving the battle?" the orc breathlessly asked.

*A mansion in Laure and to be drunk every day until I die*, Abigail mentally corrected.

"Yes," she lied.

—

"Bottoms up," Catherine said, and after clinking her vial with the Huntress' gulped it down whole.

The Concocter followed suit without the theatrics, rolling her yellow eyes at them instead, and the Range was already lying on the 'ground' that Masego had forged. They lay down, tossing away the vials, and within ten heartbeats Hierophant was surrounded by the corpses of four women. It was a somewhat awkward situation, he decided, even as he reached for the withered stalks of ground set down before him and closed his mortal eye, beginning to murmur his incantation.

He'd met the Silver Huntress and the Concocter in a professional capacity several times, and even once in a personal one when Indrani introduced him as her partner. Alexis had kindly offered him protection if he was being blackmailed into the relationship – which had, bafflingly enough, irritated Indrani – then looked rather irked herself when he'd assured her he was very fond of Archer and not being forced into anything. The Concocter had been much less mercurial, and charmingly learned in matters of alchemy. She'd even read the works of Lykourgios the Transmuter, which almost no one had! The man had unleashed several plagues that turned people into rabid animals, it was true, but that was no reason to ban his very well-written studies on transitive material properties.

Hierophant had not been worried in the slightest when he'd learned he was to be in a band with them, and they had proved to be just as capable as he'd expected. It was the last addition to the band that Catherine was leading that had nudged the situation into awkwardness: the Ranger, Hye Su. Looking at her temporarily dead form, Hierophant's mortal eye narrowed as he considered whether or not he should murder her.

Practically speaking, she was no longer necessary. She had some worth as a guide in the realm to which they were travelling but she was not *needed*. The Ranger had already given the necessary artefact, the stalks of grass, and served her purpose as a guide. It would be bad form and Catherine would be cross with him, but practicalities did not forbid him from killing Hye Su. No particular affection was holding his hand either, his fathers

having always been clear that Ranger was not like Aunt Sabah and Aunt Eudokia: she was dangerous and not to be trusted, even if Uncle Amadeus loved her. Masego had only met her a few times, and never taken to her.

He drummed his fingers against his leg thoughtfully, the incantation continuing unabated.

Hye Su was a threat, of this he was sure. Catherine had been very vague as to how she'd convinced the other woman to help, which he knew from experience meant she was hiding something she believed they would disapprove of. Usually an unnecessary personal risk she was taking. Ripping out Ranger's soul while she was unconscious and casting it into a Hell before burning her body would see to that neatly. Killing out of fear, though, was wrong. People had to give you a reason, not just something you decided yourself. If the Ranger ended up being a threat, he could always kill her later.

Which forced Masego to confront why he was still itching to kill the woman: she had hurt someone he cared for. Indrani still spoke admiringly of Ranger to this day, but as far as Hierophant was concerned she had been unfit as a teacher and a guardian. That would not be enough to deserve death – both arms, perhaps – but Indrani's claim to the Name of Ranger was. There would be conflict there, possibly combat. And Indrani was not replaceable. His life would be less without her in it, which was a sufficient reason to incinerate Hye Su so thoroughly there were not even ashes left. And still he hesitated, not moving to kill until he finished the first incantation and grimaced.

"She would be angry with me if I did," Masego said. "Rightfully so. It is her conflict to resolve and it would be an insult to do so for her."

Which meant the Ranger would live. For now. Besides, he had other concerns at the moment. His task was not an easy one.

Keter was, after all, fortified against extra-dimensional intrusions in ways that no other place on Calernia was. It was not only a matter of wards, though those defending the Crown of the Dead had been cleverly made and were nearly impossible to break. The wards themselves were a sphere that enveloped the city but they fed into a root-like system of escapements that meant overloading them would require so much power as to be effectively impossible. Trismegistus had then taken an additional precaution by having the physical anchors for them deep underground, to the extent that Masego believed them to be surrounded by magma.

Yet not even that had been enough for the lich, who had at some point decided to methodically annihilate every speck of Keter's mirror in Arcadia. Not only was access barred, there was nowhere to cross *from*. Masego was unfortunately unsure quite how this had

been accomplished – demons were his best guess – but instead of a crossing point in Arcadia all that could be found was interstitial void, an empty liminal space. It was how Masego knew for certain this had been done by the Dead King, as he had fought against the Spellblade inside a liminal space of fundamentally similar principles when he'd last come to Keter.

Accessing the void would normally have required setting foot within Keter, but Catherine said that would have been 'giving away the game' and instead they had passed through the broken shards of the Twilight Ways, requiring the Ranger's guidance to move from shard to shard while avoiding the collapsing ones or those with edges. Remaining forever trapped inside a pocket realm or being cut into several dying but forever aware parts would have been fairly likely otherwise, much as he disliked admitting that relying on Hye Su had been necessary.

Masego hummed, pulling his magic close and feeling out the edges of the Creation with his will. From there it was only a matter of following the outlines and seeing where they connected so that he might find where the Hells – and the Heavens – were adjoined. These were the very basics of diabolism as a practice, because in practice finding a Hell was not particularly difficult. Finding a useful one, or even more difficult a *specific* one, to open a gate into was another matter entirely. Unless you had several advantages, it was a fool's errand. Advantages such as, for example, casting from an adjoining liminal space where boundaries were thinned and having in your possession an object from the Hell you were seeking.

The dried stalks of grass in Hierophant's hand had grown in the Serenity, their connection to the Hell by the law of sympathy running deep and wide.

Masego began to murmur a second incantation, tracing runes in the air to shape the effect of his will – movement, transition, stability – but even as he began his attempt to cut a hole into the Hell he frowned as the resistance to his sorcery strengthened. As the Ranger had intimated, the Dead King had hardened the borders of the Serenity. However sharp Hierophant's will, a single mage – even Named – did not have the power to carve open a gate. A cabal led in a ritual might, but there would be nothing subtle or quiet about. But that was thinking of the crossing in the wrong way, as Hye Su had grasped.

When confronted with a wall a sorcerer could increase their strength to break it, but there was another way through: lessening the wall's resistance to you. And the very means the Dead King had used to harden the boundary of the Serenity, millennia of necromancy, provided the way through.

They simply needed to be dead.

It was why all the others were lying on the ground around him, having drunk of the Concocter's elixir of temporary death – save for Ranger, who simply stopped her heartbeat for a fixed amount of time – so that by creational law they would qualify as being 'dead'. Masego himself would drink of the potion vial he had in his robes as soon as the spell was near being finished, trusting the formula he had crafted to convey the five of them across into the Serenity. It was not long before he reached that point, diabolism being more a matter of precision and power than skill or inventiveness, and without ceremony he drank the substance. It tasted faintly of mint, he appreciated.

Even as his mind began to swim he felt the swirls of magic intensify, casting his will beyond them. He felt out the boundaries one last time, to make sure nothing had been wrong, which was when he noticed the oddity.

There was something wrong with the Heavens. Or at least a part of them intricately bound to the nearby part of Creation in several ways and also... the Serenity itself? It was a Choir, Hierophant realized. There was a similarity to what he was Witnessing and a spell he had crafted with Tariq Isbili's help. The smiting miracle, as some had taken to calling it. The Choir had been silenced, he saw, and though its power remained intact – angels could not be diminished – it was temporarily unable to be properly expressed. It was, essentially, a pot of paint without a colour. If called forth the Choir's power would do nothing, he thought, unless additional properties were imposed on it by a third party.

If someone chose a colour for the paint, to continue the metaphor.

Of course, there shouldn't be anyone able to do such a thing. Even Named would – only there was, he remembered. A band of five had been sent to follow the Dead King's hint in the depths of Levant and found a fascinating story. The first Grey Pilgrim had once been smote by a Choir, only to survive entirely unharmed. The Intercessor could influence angels. And so Hierophant felt an inkling of dread as he slipped into the shallow end of death.

Because if the Hierarch was still holding back the Choir of Judgement, why was he now able to feel its existence again?

—

Otto Redcrown took the blow on his shield with a grunt, the undead's blade sliding across the Reitzenberg sigil even as he shattered its head with a measured blow of his mace. His mount whinnied, hooves sending another corpse flying, and he had to pull her at her reins so she wouldn't go wild.

"Steady," he shouted, as much for his horse as his soldiers.  
"Don't let them bait you."

Those of his riders that'd began to pursue the retreating undead pulled back at the call, joining the thick of his men as they finished clearing out stragglers from the holdfast they'd driven the Enemy out of. It was not particularly dangerous work once the Binds were but down, the Bones reverting to the intelligence of mere dogs and lashing out blindly without regard for arms or armour, but the riders went about it with methodical carefulness. They all knew it would take only one mistake, and this close to finally ending the King of Death all their lives must be hoarded until the moment where they could best be spent.

Behind the horsemen his infantry had followed and was already breaking down the barricades to make room for the southern foot to pass, rolling away stones and tossing bodies aside. It had been a brutal slog to get here, but Prince Otto allowed himself an ember of pride as he saw the heights of Keter's inner wall up above. They were close now, even though every devilry they'd beaten yesterday had been replaced by a fresh horror as they charged up the avenue as they had before the Titan Kreios' sorcery had undone the battle. Far ahead of what he'd expected, and though his numbers were melting away like summer snow they were but a mile away from the rampart. There, at least, he would pull back let First Princess Rozala lead the assault.

The battle looked promising. Though the League had stalled early, Frederic had led two thousand horse to relieve them and word has since come back that Empress Basilia had broken through enemy resistance and resumed her advance. With the League screening her flank on one side and the unbreakable Army of Callow holding the other, Rozala Malanza would have the opening she needed to pierce through the wall. And once she did, the looming shape at the heart of the Alamans conscripts would do his part. The Titan would snuff out the Hidden Horror's ritual and victory would no longer be beyond their grasp.

"Your Grace! Your Grace, they've come!"

Otto's captain had shouted loudly enough half the army must have heard him, but the prince did not take her to ask for it aside from a dour look. Instead he followed the woman's pointing hand and what he saw had his teeth clenching.

"You dragged your feet today, Grey Legion," Otto Redcrown muttered. "I expected you an hour ago."

Hainaut had mauled their numbers, for not even the fearsome Grey Legion could simply shrug off having a star and a city pulled down on their heads, but enough remained to be a threat. Two thousand and some, by the latest count. At tide of steel advancing with deceiving slowness, but Otto would not be fooled.

He had seen them pass through strong shield walls like they were nothing but mist, each hulking shape a battering ram on the move.

"Form up," the prince shouted. "Form up!"

He drove his mount forward to join his horsemen, but had to pull his reins when trumpets began to sound behind him. What was Malanza doing? It was still too early for her to join him out-the thought froze in his mind as he saw that in the distance the banners of the rearguard were turning. The army was being attacked from behind. Trumpets to the east, trumpets to the west. Oh, Otto dimly realized. So that was the truth of it. They had danced to the Enemy's tune, and now they were surrounded. Their path of retreat had been cut and neither the Callowans nor the League would get there in time. Prince Otto Reitzenberg breathed out, finding his calm did not waver in the face of certain death.

It surprised him, though perhaps it should not have. Some days when he closed his eyes he found himself back at miserable afternoon, watching his father and his sisters died until the reddened crown was brought form him to wear. The least of the Reitzenberg had survived that day, he'd often thought, but perhaps he hadn't. Not really. Enough of him had stayed behind that he felt little fear at the sight of the steadily advancing Grey Legion. No, not even a little. It was only trepidation, the nervousness that came with finishing something your started long ago. Otto breathed in, looking at the darkened cloud. Ash was falling, but the sun shone through.

Before him there was a road, an enemy and a wall. He'd fought this battle before, as the last in line. Today he would be the first instead and there was fairness in that.

"Unravellers at the ready," Otto Redcrown called out, voice steady.

The horsemen reached for the sheaths at their sides, sliding out the weapons. The artefacts made in the Arsenal before it ended were as wooden lances, though shorter and partly hollow. They would shatter on impact, but that mattered nothing: they were artefacts, not killing lances, and their purpose was not to punch through armour but to unravel the sorcery keeping undead bound in servitude. A simple touch was not guaranteed to do this, not against the Grey Legion, but landing a blow in the right place had a halfway decent chance of destroying the undead. It was starkly better odds than any other weapon had ever offered.

They would die, Otto Reitzenberg thought as the riders lined up without a word. They would die in droves, screaming and clawing at the dark, and perhaps those deaths would allow the rest of the army to make it to the wall. That was the last gift they had to give. The last prince of the Lycaonese held his unraveller tight and straightened his back, eyes fixed ahead. His sisters would



have known what to say to comfort the soldiers now, he thought. His father would not have needed to say anything, beloved as he had been.

But all Otto Redcrown had to offer his people was silence and the spear in his hand, and so that was what he gave them.

"Oh mother, I held your sword."

It was a boy who sang out. The voice was too young, too light, for him to be a man grown. The prince's heart ached of it, as much sorrow as pride. Grief for another boy too young to die. Pride for the boy staring death in the eye and finding it in him to sing.

"Oh mother, I held your sword," the boy sang again, and voices joined him.

*He's one of mine*, Otto realized. The Farewell Sword was a song from Bremen, and though it was known beyond its borders it was his people who love it most. It was not like hard-eyed Hannover pride, like the desolate boasts of the Neustrians or even the famously dark humour of Rhenians. It was a sad song, the Farewell Sword, for Otto's people had an old sadness in their bones. How strange, that to hear it sung would feel a comfort now.

"Oh mother, I held your sword," voices rose, Otto's among them.

He reached for his mace, pointed it forward and without a word needed the riders began to advance.

"As I rode north to settle score

And bade farewell to the stone."

The thunder of hooves on pavement almost drowned out the song as the trot turned into a gallop.

"Oh mother, there is no lord

To bring back the blade I wore

For I went and died all alone."

The distance, so long when they had begun, was now so small. Swallowed in an instant until Otto could see dents and scrapes on the armour of the Grey Legion's steel-clad dead. Unravellers were lowered, wood whistling in the air.

"Oh mother, I held your sword."

For a heartbeat the world hung still, the fragile wooden length snaking forward as he leaned against his mount's neck and the enemy moved to knock it aside. Too slow, he thought.

*"And I come now to return it,"* Otto Redcrown screamed.

The unraveller shattered even as it hit the undead's shoulder, screaming against the steel and digging in. Not deep enough, though, as the mass of steel kept moving and swept through the legs of Otto's horse in a single blow. The horse screamed in pain, bones shattering, and the prince was thrown against the stone. He tasted blood in his mouth and his knees were throbbing, but he rolled to the side before his ribs could be caved in by a hulking step. He rose, moving behind the undead so he could strike at the knee joint with a two-handed blow of his mace. It dented the steel, enough that it crumpled inwards and began grinding against itself when the soldier moved.

He stepped back, but not quickly enough to avoid the blow entirely. The hammer clipped his shoulder, smashing through his pauldron as he was tossed to the ground like a ragdoll. All around him horses and men were dying, a thin wedge of riders passing through the Grey Legion's ranks but most of them dying. Before the momentum had entirely passed the infantry joined them, half a dozen different accents in Reitz screaming themselves hoarse as they hurled themselves at the steel-clad monsters. Otto got back to his feet, jostled by men passing him, and dragged his armour back in place while swallowing a scream. He could have pulled back, he knew. Called for a change of armour.

He was a Reitzenberg: he would fight until the Enemy broke, or he did.

*"In Iron Forged,"* he shouted, and returned to the fray.

They charged the monsters and they died. Otto helped a bearded man smash the back of one's knee and laughed in triumph with him when they brought the soldier down, a fair-haired girl that could be no older than fifteen smashing a hammer into the neck joint until the head rolled away and it stopped moving. A heartbeat later the bearded man was bloody mist and Otto pulled the girl out of the way, the two of them going back in as rider shattered a lance in the monster's face and an opening was made. There was always another steel-clad monstrosity no matter how many were brought down, and as his people died around him Otto felt rage well up in his throat.

They wouldn't even get through, he saw. They wouldn't even clear the way for the others. They'd just die.

He screamed himself ragged as he smashed his mace into a steel soldier's face, avoiding the swing of its sword but taking a backhand to the torso. He fell down, feet slipping against a pavement made slick by the blood of his people, and even as the sword rose above him in a blow there would be no avoiding, he grit his teeth and swung his mace as the sun shone down into his

eyes. One last gesture of defiance. The steel soldier's knee gave, but the sword was still coming down and-

"*Audace*," someone screamed in Chantant, and the tip of lance nudged the sword aside with impossible precision.

The sun blinded him still, but he knew that voice. Struggling to stand in the blood, Otto forced himself up in time to see the Kingfisher Prince plunge a sword burning with Light into the steel-clad undead's neck. Prince Frederic Goethal of Brus laughed, his blond ringlets shaking as he ripped his sword clear of the falling soldier's body, and raised his sword to the sun. All around them, Otto realized, the horsemen that'd gone to relieve the League were smashing into the side of the Grey Legion with their own unravellers.

"*Audace*," the Bruseni madmen called out, cheering as they drove deep into the enemy's flank.

Throat dry, Otto reached out for his friend.

"Frederic," he rasped as he caught the other man's knee. "Leave us. You have to open the way for Malanza, else they will-"

"Peace, Otto," the Kingfisher Prince gently said, catching his hand. "If there is a field where you die, my friend, I will not be far behind you."

"We have to save them," he croaked. "I can't let them die again. I *can't*, Fred."

"And you won't," the Prince of Brus promised. "Look east, Otto. See what you missed when keeping us all alive."

And he saw, then what it was Frederic meant. On the army's left flank, where before there had been fighting, now instead there were fresh banners. Blue with silver Miezan numerals, a three. And with them, another banner he knew well: the Crown and Sword. The Black Queen's arms. Reinforcements had come. The Third Army was here.

"How?" he finally asked.

"The Dead King might have tricked us, Otto," Frederic grinned, "but he didn't trick the Fox."

—

Hanno's steps stuttered to a halt.

"We're here," Christophe said, and immediately winced.

Likely castigating himself for having stated the obvious. The two of them had gone around the Proceran vanguard's brutal fight with

the Grey Legion, the Mirror Knight's gaining turning more reluctant every time he had a look at the Lycaonese losses. Christophe had proved once that he could hold back the tide when fighting that same host, and now every time it fought without him being there to face it he thought himself responsible for the deaths. Hanno had sometimes been questioned for his defence of Christophe de Pavanie since the man took his fingers, but he could not think of a better or simpler defence than that.

Before them stood the second wall of Keter, the rampart that the armies would have to breach to reach the inner city and reach the Dead King himself. Though Hanno could not know how the Praesi were doing in their thrust from the northern gate, he could see how the Procerans had done and they were nearly there. It would not even take half an hour before First Princess Rozala began storming the walls and the Riddle-Maker could begin the spell that would silence the entropy traps. Once that was done, Named were to converge towards the palace where they would assemble in bands before going after the remaining Revenants and Scourges so that the way could be cleared for the Crown of Autumn and the Severance. Catherine, meanwhile, was supposed to be striking at the enemy from the back.

"Do we stay hidden until Her Serene Grace strikes at the walls?" the Mirror Knight quietly asked. "We're here, Hanno. We could help them with the last of the Grey Legion."

He had been debating the same. Though they were meant to remain hidden so that Christophe could not be targeted by the Scourges, would they really be able to converge here in time if they lent a hand? Hanno had his doubts. On the other hand, revealing the Mirror Knight's position early was almost certain to warrant the Dead King's attention: Christophe was, after all, carrying one of the means to kill the Hidden Horror. It was hard to justify anything to posed a risk to the Severance getting to that throne room. Before Hanno could consider the matter more, footsteps on a rooftop behind them had both heroes reaching for their swords.

But it was the Knight Errant who leapt down past them, that strange sword of his in hand, turning only at the sound of Hanno sheathing his own blade. The younger man looked surprised but pleased.

"Ah, I thought we'd have to look for you two for longer," Arthur smiled. "Lucky us."

The meaning of 'we' was swiftly expanded upon when the rest of the band followed suit and came down from the roof. Hanno's brow rose when he saw there were only two more instead of four: the Painted Knife and the Harrowed Witch, the latter of which took her time to shimmy down the side of the house rather than leap. Kallia, leader of the band, offered him a grimace.

"We lost the Poisoner to the Hawk while the Prince of Bones distracted us," she told him.

"And the Myrmidon?"

"We're not sure she's dead," Kallia said. "She fell into a trap while killing a Revenant and the Tumult dropped about a ton of rock over her, but we never saw a body."

"We haven't seen a single Revenant on our way here," Christophe told her, "much less a Scourge."

The Levantine eyed him with distaste. Though the Mirror Knight had made efforts to mend bridges him, the Painted Knife was not of a forgiving nature and it was not in Christophe's nature to keep his feet out of his mouth for too long.

"The Dead King is going after bands," Hanno said. "He's trying to thin us out as much as possible before we reach his palaces."

"We figured," Kallia told him. "I heard through Apprentice that Sidonia's band got hit as well. I haven't gotten word about deaths, though, only that there was fighting."

Hanno's stomach clenched.

"Did they get to the crown?"

"That would require taking the Archer by surprise," the Painted Knife snorted, "and good luck to anyone who tries."

Hanno was not anywhere as convinced, but he let it go. Neither of them could know for certain, arguing was pointless.

"Shall we go reinforce the Procerans?" the Knight Errant asked. "They could use the help, and the sooner we get the Titan to the wall the sooner we can seek out the Dead King."

It was a simple enough question. And yet Hanno stilled to hear it. He knew what he was supposed to answer: they were all to wait until the Proceran assault on the wall began and only then intervene. That was what the plan called for. Getting the Severity to the Dead King was the most important thing, and though Hanno rankled at the thought he recognized the sense in it. Saving even a thousand lives out here on the battlefield would mean nothing if the Dead King won and everyone on Calernia died for it. And Hanno, looking at the same man who he was to protect at all costs, could not help but think back of the Arsenal.

They'd argued, there, about right and wrong. And though Christophe had been wrong about many things that day, he had been right about others. *What single thing can we not be made to swallow, when it is put to contrast with the end of days, the*

Mirror Knight had challenged. What as a principle, if you did not keep to it in the dark? *What's a principle, when keeping to it kills everyone*, a voice that sounded uncomfortably like Catherine's argued back. Hanno found himself reaching for an old comfort, for the coin the Seraphim had once given him. Justice at the tip of his fingers. He missed that still, sometimes. Not having to rely on his own blind eyes to parse it all.

His fingers closed around the silver coin, the feel of its edges rough against his skin.

"Lord Hanno?" the Knight Errant said, tone hesitant.

Part of him wanted to tell them to do as they wished, but that was an abdication of responsibility. He had put himself forward to remain representative of Above under the Truce and Terms. He was to be the enforcer of the laws of the Liesse Accords under the Warden. To tell them they could do as they wished would be moral cowardice. In the end, he realized, it came down to a choice. Was it irresponsible to take the risk, or was it cowardice not to? Lives could be saved if he acted, but lives could be lost as well. Possibly much more than were saved. But was that really a reason not to act?

What had he cast away his own Name for, his place as the Sword of Judgement, if not to *do something*?

Hanno breathed out, looking at the sky, and felt a calm settle upon him. He rolled the coin between his fingers, and with a deft flicked of his thumb flipped it. It arced upwards, silver shining in the sun, and looking at it Hanno knew which side he wanted it to land on.

And so he knew what to do.

"Follow the plan," Hanno told them. "Stay hidden and protecting Christophe until the assault on the wall has begun."

Mutinous looks answered. The Knight Errant was the one who answered.

"We could-"

"I will settle it," the dark-skinned hero simply said, "so follow the plan."

He felt Creation quicken around him at the words. It had been waiting, hadn't it? For his resolve to take shape. And now it had: if it was a risk to do the right thing, what you should be doing, then you simply had to be powerful enough it was no longer a risk. Hanno of Arwad slowly unsheathed his sword, feeling the first motes of his Name begin to coalesce. It was not there yet, he thought. But it would be by this battle's end.

"Go," he said, his voice echoing in a way that had them shivering.

Not even the young knight argued with that. They went, disappearing into the maze of houses, and the hero slowly turned his gaze south. He had work to do, he thought, and began to walk. Hanno did not look on what side the coin had fallen, leaving it down there in the ash.

He no longer had a use for it.

## **Interlude: Legends III**

*"Not two sentiments are more deeply intertwined than hope and fear: the deeper one, the starker the other."*

*– Magister Haides the Elder of Stygia*

First Princess Rozala Malanza sat her saddle, fingers clenched around the handle of her sword, and watched as her people died like flies.

Conscripts, fantassins and the remains of the armies of Procer stormed the last wall of Keter with ladders. Not for her soldiers, the siege towers and ballistae of the easterners: they made do with courage and catapults, the carpet of corpses beneath their feet so thick it was as if a snowstorm of cadaver had blown through. A ram was hammering at the gate below, enchanted by her finest mages, but it was like trying to smash a stone with an egg. However skilled her wizards, they were no match for the Hidden Horror's arcane mastery.

Yesterday, in that world that was taken back, Rozala and her host had not made it this far. They might not have this time, either, had the Fox not shattered the encirclement they'd charged into and anchored her left flank as she pivoted her lines to the right to face the onslaught. It had been a hard fight but she had won it, driving back the dead and shattering the houses in their wake to make barricades just as the Dead King had done against them as they'd advanced. A third of the Grey Legion had retreated through the gates into the inner city, Rozala having to twice order Prince Otto back so he would not pursue.

The northerners had been pulled back, moved to the rearguard where healers were trying to keep as many of their wounded alive as possible. The First Princess knew the weight of the debt she owed: the Lycaonese had served as her vanguard all the way to the rampart, shattering themselves on every barricade and elite guard so that the rest of the army would arrive in good state. It had been a cold choice for her to make, but a necessary one. If her soldiers were to die by the score with every heartbeat as they

tried the inner wall, she would rather send the conscript into that storm than the Lycaonese.

Procer still had plenty of men, for all its horrendous losses, but few of the calibre of the Lycaonese. They were a resource to he carefully spent, not carelessly thrown into the slaughterhouse.

However ugly the thought, it was the price of being in command to have to think it. Rozala's role on this dark day was not to keep soldiers alive but to win, for defeat now would be the end of them all. And still the princess of Aquitan – and Salia, now that she sat the high throne – felt her gauntleted hand grind against the grip of her sword. Everywhere she looked, men died. They shouted and screamed and fought with desperate strength to take the wall, but the strength of the Enemy was not waning. She was forced to look away from the butchery when her personal guard parted to allow a mounted man through.

"Your Highness," Prince Arsene greeted her, bowing as much as he could when armoured and ahorse.

"Your Grace," Rozala simply replied.

She did not ask him why he had come, letting silence do the speaking for her.

"Captain-General Ferreiro has swept the wall," the Prince of Bayeux informed her. "She has a foothold and requests reinforcements so that she might expand on it."

The First Princess took a moment to recall where the fantassin captain was fighting – further east, close to Beatrice of Hainaut's forces – before decisively nodding.

"Then we commit the reserves to her breach," Rozala said. "The gatehouse still holds strong, we may not have another opportunity."

"My thoughts exactly," Prince Arsene smiled.

Even odds whether or not he was lying. The Prince of Bayeux had spent most of the war trying to keep his soldiers out of the fighting as much as possible, but he was not unskilled in military matters. For all that he was averse to risk in battle, he might well realize that Rozala meant every word when she said that this might be the only opportunity for a breakthrough they would get today. Desperation on your part did not mean weakness on the enemy's, the First Princess knew. She had learned that lesson during the Great War, long before she sat a throne.

"Pass on my compliments to Captain-General Ferreiro," Rozala added. "I believe the Ligera Bandera might well be the first to



take the wall today. A boast worth adding to the histories of their company."

Should they all survive, she did not add. It was the dark cloud that haunted every sentence spoken these days, like some pettily malevolent ghost. Prince Arsene bowed again, offering three flowery compliments about her beauty before taking his leave. *Alamans*, she thought, turning her head so that no one would see her roll her eyes. Most of Rozala's captains were out there, leading the Aquitan troops in assault their section of the wall, but she had kept a few with her under the salamander banner of the Malanzas to serve as councillors and command her retinue.

Captain Salvador had served her house for half a century, first her mother and then her. He'd once saved her life at the Sack of Lullefeuille. So when the hatched-faced man with the great mustache came to her with a grim look, Rozala straightened. Salvador was past sixty now, but there were few men she trusted more.

"There is trouble," he quietly told her. "Our path back to camp is being cut off."

Rozala's stomach clenched.

"The dead are moving in behind us?" she asked.

"Princess Beatrice sends words that her outriders caught companies of Bones circling around her position instead of hitting her flank," Captain Salvador said.

"Then they're moving to hit us from the back," Rozala grimaced.

Which was a potential disaster. When launching her assaults on the walls, she had been forced to cycle her wounded to the back of her formation so that fresh troops could lead the storm. There were fresh Orense men there also, of course, she was not the kind of fool to leave her back unguarded. But it was the most fragile part of her army and the Dead King's general seemed to have sniffed out the weakness.

"What can we spare?" she asked.

"Not much, unless the reserve is recalled from the storm," the older man told her.

Which she could not. Not only had she just sent them out, if they were pulled away then the Ligera Bandera's foothold would be lost and their assault might entirely fail. But if the rear of the army collapsed, then... *Fear is what the Enemy wants*, the First Princess reminded herself. *It is what he seeks with this manoeuvre*. Rozala found her calm, laying a hand on the curved

breastplate her late pregnancy was forcing her to wear. She knew what must be done.

"Scrape together everything you can," Rozala ordered. "And raise the banner."

"Your Highness?" Captain Salvador asked.

"We fight, sir," the First Princess of Procer said. "I will lead the defence myself."

—

Yara of Nowhere did not exist, then she did.

She was the edge of a roof, a handful of Revenants moving below her. There was a loose tile under her foot. She had never been able to feel Neshamah's little puppets as well as true Named, but the echoes of their authorities gave her just a bit of a hook. It didn't amount to much, since he could take control of them whenever he wished, but sometimes all you needed was a pebble to start the avalanche. Yara hummed, fingers tapping against the side of her leg, and waited for the right time. It was easy enough to know it even with her sight ripped out, for to **Narrate** a story was to know how to incite incident. Like, say, by nudging a loose tile forward. It dropped, shattering in the street, and the noise drew the attention of the last of the moving puppets.

The Revenant turned and saw in the distance the glint of the sun on steel.

"That'll do it," Yara mused, reaching for her flask.

Sahelian was hard to read, close to Named but not, and that made it difficult to follow her story past a certain point. For this much, though, what Yara could see would be enough. That pretty little trick the Hierophant had cooked up with the Crown of Autumn was not to stay in the game. It was a defeat Nessie might be willing to suffer, being shackled with that, and there would be none of that. The Grand Alliance was going to fight a cornered rat with nothing to lose, not a becalmed King of Death thinking there was still a way out of this. He was losing the Serenity, his great defensive ritual was being cracked open but the dwarves and now armies were about to hit the last of his walls.

"Didn't I tell you, Neshamah?" Yara said, raising her flask in a toast. "Eat the fucking baby."

—

Akua first knew it was going wrong when she saw the corpses.

Two of them, laying abandoned on the ground. The Grizzled Fantassin had been stabbed in the throat repeatedly until there

was nothing left there but red meat, and she would not have recognized the Hunted Magician if not for his rich enchanted robes. The Proceran mage's corpse was shrivelled beyond recognition, a dried-out husk.

"Shit," Archer whispered. "There go our reinforcements."

"Only two dead out of the band," Akua said.

"Sidonia led them," Indrani said, her tone too casual. "She's not the kind of woman that'd leave the dead bodies of her people behind if she's in any state to take them."

The Vagrant Spear had spent some time under Archer when she led a band of her own, the sorceress recalled. There might have been genuine fondness there, though this was not the time for comfort and Indrani hardly cared to receive that sort of thing anyway. Not from her, at least. Only Catherine and Masego had managed to wedge themselves between the porcupine's thorns so they would not prick their hand when extending it. Akua instead threw up shields without voicing an incantation even as her Archer nocked an arrow, only then approaching the bodies. There was no telling whether it was a Revenant, a Scourge or even simple dead that'd done this.

The Hunted Magician had been killed by a curse but those were not unique to the Mantle, and there seemed to be nothing magical about the Grizzled Fantassin's ruined throat.

"So?" Archer asked.

"No telling whose work it was," Akua admitted. "But I still believe we should change our path."

"To where?" Indrani replied. "We can't go east to the Proceran push, the whole point of riding in the shadow of Hakram's assault was making sure our eggs weren't all in one basket. We could try to go north to see if the Praesi are getting through, but there's nothing certain about it."

"I do not believe Bones did this," the golden-eyed mage said, pointing at the bodies. "Which means it is also a certainty we will face Revenants, if we continue our path to the inner wall."

"We can handle Revenants," Archer dismissed, but Akua's eyes narrowed.

Ah, she thought. Indrani was hoping to destroy whatever undead had assaulted the Vagrant Spear's band in order to avenge a woman she'd been fond of.

"Whether or not we can beat them is irrelevant," Akua replied. "Revenants are not like other dead, a part of Trismegistus'

attention rides with them always. The moment we fight even one, he will know where we are."

Indrani's face tightened with displeasure. Akua began to muster her arguments – using Catherine tended to be useful but only in small doses, since Archer would rebel at the thought of being 'tame' – when the other woman suddenly sighed and spat to the side.

"You're right, Former Phantom," Indrani conceded. "We need to make it quietly to the wall. Past Hakram's lines and north to the Praesi, then?"

"It seems our best bet," Akua agreed. "We-"

Sudden warmth against her skin as one of the enchanted rubies beneath her armour suddenly heated told her an enchantment was being directed at her, which saved her life. By reflex, she detonated her shields and the burst of it kicked up ash, coating the invisible Seelie's side with it even as an illusion pretended to stab Akua in the throat. Archer kicked the Scourge in the side, getting a grunt out of her, and Akua hissed out an incantation. She threw a fireball at the Revenant's head which the illusionist contemptuously cut through only to trigger the second part of the formula, a vicious burst of frost that shattered the blade.

The redheaded Scourged in her vulgar gown snarled, her passably attractive face turning monstrous and sinister, and barked out a word in something that sounded like Chantant.

"Time to run," Archer grunted, idly putting an arrow in the eye of what turned out to be an illusion.

The Seelie was gone again, no doubt looking for an opening.

"Agreed," Akua fervently said. "It's only a matter of time until-"

A wave of pressure pushed at her magic as a ward came down. *Containment*, the sorceress idly assessed. *We are being kept inside a circle.*

"That," she finished with a sigh.

"Cage?" Indrani asked, nocking an arrow as she spoke.

Akua nodded, beginning a trailing cant – the shared beginning of several spells of very different effects, which would let her adapt to the situation as it unfolded instead of being forced to start anew if taken by surprise.

"Bummer," Archer drily said.

As if summoned by the word, silhouettes crested at the edge of rooftops and walked out into the streets surrounding them. Not a horde this, only a dozen individuals or so, but that was not a good sign. A horde of skeletons, Akua could have scattered easily.

The dozen Revenants converging on them would be harder to deal with.

—

The Dead King was not holding back, Rozala thought.

The Enemy had assembled a force meant to break her army's rearguard with poisonous haste since the defeat inflicted on its attempted encirclement. The fangs were first bared before the First Princess arrived with her reinforcements, an attack in two strokes. First a stream of pale slug-like creatures made of corpse fat had swarmed all over the broken gate of Keter, devouring the soldiers there and then allowing themselves to be lit aflame by some undead mage. They burned merrily, cutting off Rozala's army from the camp and filling the air with poisonous clouds that the wind was blowing her way. The second stroke came when ghouls began pouring out of what she was assured had been an empty house, overrunning three positions before a shield wall could be assembled.

"We faced the same trap yesterday," the First Princess told the still-befuddled Orense general. "Deep basements were dug under some of the houses and kept sealed after being filled to the brim with undead. The enemy were there all along, waiting for the Dead King's order."

At least it wasn't a maze of tunnels under the city they were dealing with, only sporadic hidden basements – though Rozala suspected that had more to do with a strong mage being able to collapse tunnels than lack of interest on the Dead King's part. He'd always liked his underground tricks, the old monster. There was a reason Rozala still had to sleep with an ear to the ground no matter how many wards she intellectually knew were keeping the dead from digging underneath the camp.

"I am shamed to have been caught by it," the dark-haired general replied. "We will earn back our honour with blood, Your Highness. Our shield wall will hold."

*No it won't*, Rozala thought, looking at the clash. Not only was Keter flooding their backlines with every spare undead they had to throw at it but a force had also clearly been assembled to crack their shield wall. It was the only reason the First Princess could think of there being so many 'mantises' here. Unlike beorns and tusks, who were meant to shatter shield walls with sheer power, that particular breed of monsters worked in

precision. At first look they could pass for strange, carapaced horses but once they closed distance the mantises revealed the reason for their name: long, segmented legs ending in hooked bones blades unfolded.

They went over the shields of shield walls, tearing through soldiers from the back to shred them in moments.

She could see at least four dozen of those mixed in the horde the Orense soldiery was holding back as her retinue came to prop the up, though they had not yet struck. The moment they did, the entire shield wall would collapse in a matter of moments. Rozala's mind spun, looking for a way through. What mages she had were already busy keeping vultures away, lest the flying pests begin going for the wounded and attack the healers, and though she'd been able to pull away a few priests it would not be enough to hold back the enemy when they pushed. Their defence would not hold, she realized as she went through every trick and tactic she'd learned since she had first taken up command.

There was nothing she knew that would keep the dead from tearing past them and overrunning the infirmaries, sweeping over priests and wounded before consuming the entire Proceran army from the inside.

Then the banner caught her eye. The scarlet salamander on flaxen bed with the Malanza words beneath: Through Peril, Rise. Yes, Rozala thought, laying a hand over the armour beneath which her daughter yet to be born slumbered. *I should not have forgot.* She could not hold the defences of the rearguard, not with the forces at hand, so she ought not to defend at all. She gave her instructions, sent for the priests and the horsemen, and then reached for her banner to take it up. Rozala spurred her horse forward, heading for the shield wall, and once there shouted the order.

"STRIKE," the First Princess of Procer screamed. "We were the first wall of Calernia and we will not fail it today, so STRIKE!"

There were not enough priests to make a great wall of yellow Light, the kind that had been first used at the Battle of Camps and one many fighting says since, but that wasn't what Rozala had been after. Instead she had told them to create oblique lines through the enemy ranks, crackling Light burning the dead whenever they touched it. Their formation suddenly crisscrossed by lines of Light, the undead fell into disarray even as the Proceran foot surged forward. Rozala surged with them, a ring of guards around her as to the sides the last of her cavalry poured into the breach. It was working, the First Princess realized with numb relief. The mantises had come out but they were a precision tool, not much better than any other construct in a wild melee, and as the dead were driven back the priests ended their lines of Light to create fresh ones deeper in.

But the attack was slowing down, ground to a halt by the sheer thickness of the ranks of the dead, and Rozala knew her duty.

She went into the press of it, sword in hand and banner in the other. It was a wild thing, the melee, and though she swung through skulls and shattered shields a ghoul slipped past her guards and under her horse, eviscerating her. The undead was pinned by a spear a moment later but Rozala fell off, desperately leaning on the banner so she wouldn't land on her belly. It was in an awkward crouch she landed, both hands on the banner's shaft as she had dropped her sword. She groped for it and heard roars around her as she rose, the soldiers burning at the sight of the First Princess fighting in the ranks. Malanza swords all around her, Rozala raised her banner.

"Procer," she shouted. "For Procer, and every land we lost!"

They charged, Light and sorcery crackling on all sides as steel clashed with steel. The dead were breaking, Rozala could feel it. And soon there would be reinforcements – the Fox was sure to see that there was heavy fighting at the rearguard and move to support them. The enemy lines gave, like gasping lips, but even as triumph swelled in her heart Rozala Malanza saw the Revenant. A tall and armoured form, its rusted plate weeping red as it strode forward and calmly cut through men. Its great two-handed broadsword shattered shields and smashed helms, unerringly cutting down anyone who approached. And the Revenant was coming, inexorably, for her.

"Priests," Rozala shouted, but none answered.

It would be steel, then. She surged forward with her retinue, unwilling to give the enemy the choice of how to engage. They would flood it with numbers. Only the Revenant kept advancing, cutting through one soldier after another and ignoring the blows that ripped at its rusted plate only to reveal only weeping redness beneath it. Rozala screamed as Captain Salvador's head went flying past her, thrusting her blade into the Revenant's visor, but she felt no flesh beneath the steel. Only bones and wetness. The Revenant cut at her, sending her flying back as her pauldron came off from the strength of the blow and her bones creaked.

Leaning on the banner she got back to her feet as the Revenant kept calmly advancing. All around her the charge was faltering, fear spreading through her soldiers, and Rozala Malanza breathed out. It was clear, in her mind's eye, what must be done. One last death to stiffen their spine and save the army from collapse. *I'm sorry, Louis*, she thought. *We'll both wait for you halfway there, that we might meet the Gods Above together.* The First Princess of Procer lowered her banner like a spear, pointing at the Revenant, and shook her hair free of her helm. She took a step forward,

seeing the rising arc of the enemy's blade and her death waiting within in.

"Forward," Rozala Malanza shouted, charging forward. "And fear not-"

Before the banner could spear the Revenant's throat, before its blade could take her head, a star fell. Or so it felt like, for the blinding Light seared her eyes as she glimpsed a man rip out the dead Name's sword arm and wetness gush out. Rozala stepped back, shading her eyes, and when the brightness faded she saw Hanno of Arwad drive his sword deep in the Revenant's guts. Light boiled, roiled, and red vapour wafted upwards as the creature let out a silent scream. The hero turned to her, face calm as glimmers of Light turned his eyes gold in the shade of the falling ash, and smiled.

"And fear not death," Hanno of Arwad smiled. "Not while I am here."

The hero cocked his head to the side, as if listening to a voice only he could heard, and then he was gone in a burst of movement. Leaving the First Princess of Procer to look forward at the collapsing ranks of the dead before her, and the victory she had somehow not needed to die to achieve.

—

The Mirror Knight took the blow on his shield, the beorn driving him three step backs into a swarm of skeletons that hit away at his armour fruitlessly. Even when they found his skin, their blades bounced off. Gritting his teeth, Christophe de Pavanie pulled at the power within himself. **Reflect**. The beorn's belly was ripped open as the strength it had struck with was thrown back at it, the hero taking a measured step forward to cut all the way through the side with his blade to make sure it wouldn't be getting up. He shook off the skeletons, smashing them every which way, and checked that the Severance was still safely loosened to his back. It was.

A Bind had tried to take it earlier only to be cut all the way through without Christophe lifting a finger to achieve this, but this would not be the Dead King's last attempt. He was out in the open now, it was only a matter of time until harder foes than skeletons and beorns came forward. Absent-mindedly sweeping through a company of skeletons to make it back to the Liger's position, the Mirror Knight found most the others had gone further down the rampart to help the fantassins in their bid to reach the gatehouse and wrest open the doors. Attempting to go down into the inner city through the stairs had only served to revealed that the 'entropy fields' were already awake.



Only the Knight Errant remained at the foothold, the boy in fair armour wielding a sword that looked like smoke turned into a blade.

"Sir Mirror," Arthur Foundling called out. "You've returned. The beorn?"

"Done," Christophe said. "There were also a pair of tusks so I cleaned them up while I was there."

They might have been difficult for the fantassins to deal with, if he'd not been there to take the charge on their behalf.

"You just-" the boy began, then shook his head. "Never mind, I should have expected no less."

Was the Knight Errant doubting his word? It was an insult, but Christophe supposed he'd been the only one to see the tusks. He would not take it personally. Callowans were not well inclined to him as a rule.

"Have you spoken with Captain-General Ferreiro?" he asked.

"No," Arthur Foundling said, "but she sent an officer. She's focusing on the push towards the gatehouse to try to let in the rest of the army, but she's warned us that-"

A shadow was cast over the two of them and the soldiers all around, for a tall shape had come to stand between them and the sun. The Titan Kreios strode over houses carefully, taking pains to avoid stepping on Proceran soldiers, but he was tall enough even a careful stride was like the wind. Christophe had never quite realized how tall the Riddle-Maker was, taller even than the towering Gigantes. The ancient mage used no ladder to climb the rampart, climbing it as one would a garden fence. He crushed a few hundred dead rising to his feet, standing taller now than all of Keter save for the tower deep at the heart of the Crown of the Dead.

"That the Titan is headed our way," the Knight Errant faintly said.

"Thank you for the warning," Christophe politely said.

Which had the boy glaring at him for some reason. Callowans, he ruefully thought. So prickly. The eyes of the Titan found them both, sliding over to the Severance and lingering there for a moment.

"Children," Kreios Riddle-Maker said. "Prepare yourselves. I will now silence the enemy's trick."

The Knight Errant saluted with his sword, but Christophe simply nodded. Satisfied of the acknowledgements, the Titan stepped down

into the fields of time that should have wasted him away like a man sliding into a pond. The old god only laughed at the magic lapped at his body.

"A hundred million droplets can be an ocean, Young King, but they can also be nothing more than rain. Your learning is yet shallow."

The Titan raised his hands, and magic began to pour out of the ground like tendrils.

"Kronia will forgive me, this once, for borrowing her sickle."

The Mirror Knight watched silent as magic burned, igniting the air, and stone began to turn to dust.

—

Akua flicked her wrist, a burst of nail-shaped curses flying out and hitting the Revenant's face.

They punched through the skin and he began to scream as his senses melted, the sorceress hastily backing away as a burst of flame exploded where she had stood a heartbeat before. Tracing a rune in the air, she smothered the smoldering sparks before they could turn into an animated shape again and broke into a run before the javelins began to fall. She turned a corner even as the sound of them crashing through stone tiles sounded behind her, murmuring a curse of thinning as she trailed a finger across the wall she was passing by. A heartbeat later a long-haired winged Revenant in armour dropped behind Akua, her iron spear already halfway into a strike.

Just in time for the wall to collapse on top of her armoured form.

Akua tossed back a minor jinx of slipperiness on the pile of stones to slow her down, knowing that the formula was highly responsive to separate surfaces, and lengthened the strides of her run. Archer was meant to be covering her, but... The thought was interrupted by a familiar silhouetted being thrown through a bronze grid a mere ten paces before her, Indrani let out a curse as she tumbled into old dust and landed in a sprawl. The golden-eyed Soninke dipped into her magic again, crafting a quick and loose illusion of the two of them running away as she ducked into the house and dragged Archer out of sight.

"Hey, Akua," Indrani groaned. "You found that ward anchor yet?"

Until it was destroyed, neither of them was getting out of the glowing circle in which they were being forced to fight. They'd tried, and while people and objects seemed able to come in

nothing seemed able to come out – not even dust, which was coating the side of an invisible half-sphere instead.

“I believe I have,” she replied, “but you won’t like it.”

“It’s under that fucker in the golden armour, isn’t it?” Archer sighed.

“I narrowed it down to a city block and within it there is a house whose entrances were all sealed by magic,” Akua said.

“The one with the golden fucker on it,” Indrani pressed.

She nodded in agreement, offering a sympathetic grimace.

“At least it’s not a second Scourge,” Archer said. “That’d be a little much even for me.”

Which was, naturally, when lightning struck the roof above them and the Tumult made his entrance into the battle. Akua cursed, throwing up a shield as the two of them made for the door under collapsing stone, only to find two Revenants bearing swords and shields already there. The Twins, Akua had taken to calling them in her mind. Neither of them were all that difficult to deal with, but so long as one stood the other would keep repairing itself. They were not a great concern, but if they were here... Archer grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, throwing the both of them to the side as javelins began to fall like rain. They were simple bronze rods, but each hit with the strength of a ballista’s bolt.

That Revenant only had one trick, but it was a decent one.

Akua landed on her back, Indrani’s elbow digging into her face, and as the other woman got up longknives in hand she idly bespelled a cloud of smoke to blow into the face of the Twins. Knees aching, she began to rise. If she lingered, javelins would follow.

“I’ll take Ugly and Ugles,” Archer said. “Can you blow open that closed house?”

“I can,” Akua agreed, but her eyes strayed above.

Storm clouds were gathering above their head. The Tumult had learned better than to fight her face to face, but its ability to so easily serve as magical artillery remained a thorn in Akua’s side. If she’d not been looking that way already, the sorceress would never have seen the roof tile bend. As if there had been weight on it. She began to trace a shield, but even as Indrani turned at her alarmed shout and the Seelie flooded both their sights with illusions, Akua knew the Scourge’s knife would strike true. The timing had been too good.

Or so she believed, until the Seelie came back into sight as her knife-wielding arm was snatched out of the air and she was smashed into the ground.

"You move loudly," the Lord of Silent Steps chided the undead.

Akua's heart soared at the sight. Ivah of the Losara was a powerful ally, for all that it usually disdained head-on fights.

"Ivah," Archer grinned. "You took your time."

"Apologies, Mighty Archer," Ivah idly replied. "I had to shepherd children."

"HONOUR TO THE BLOOD!"

Akua blinked away the burn of the Light as the Vagrant Spear tore into the side of one of the Twins, deftly kicking the other in the face as she pierced through the other's stomach. Akua flicked a spell of binding at the feet of the one getting kicked, ensuring he fell, and Indrani shoved a knife through the throat of what should have been the Seelie but was instead a bed of wilted flower petals. Twice now the Scourge had pulled that trick and it wasn't getting any less annoying. The sorceress smoothly transitioned into the incantation for a triple-layered shield that would be able to withstand the javelins soon to follow, but it ended up unnecessary.

A spectre leapt out to devour them as they howled through the air, the Harrowed Witch recalling her brother's bound shade to her side afterwards.

"The third?" Akua asked the Lord of Silent Steps.

"Listen for the shouting," the Firstborn drily replied.

There was a blind scream of rage somewhere ahead, followed by a house collapsing and the storm clouds above their heads calling down lightning there instead. One the torrent of lethal magic had passed and smoke began to rise, mocking laughter came from that direction.

"Should have put your back into it, Tumult," the Red Knight taunted. "I've had worse from Clevelen weather."

Well, Akua thought as she rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck – a terribly uncouth habit, but exactly as satisfying as she'd thought it would feel when she had first seen Catherine indulge – now this ought to be a rather more even fight. She adjusted the box holding the Crown of Autumn on her back and reached for her magic.

"Let's begin this properly, then," the Doom of Liesse said, her smiled showing all too many teeth.

—

Cordelia had always hated battles.

An ironic thing, considering that for all her politicking it was victorious battles that had enthroned her as First Prince of Procer, but no less true for it. One of her predecessors, First Princess Eugénie of Lange, had once called diplomacy 'war without all the clumsiness'. For all that Cordelia was inclined to think well of the woman's record otherwise – most of her reign had been spent repairing Procer after the wounds inflicted by the Dominion throwing out its occupiers – in that particular matter she disagreed. Diplomacy was simply not as arbitrary as war, where an empire could be doomed because it had been a misty morning or the wind was blowing the wrong way.

Under the intellectual disliked, though, the fair-haired princess knew that her hatred came from the source of helplessness. All her life she had sent other people to make war on her behalf, sitting miles away behind tall walls and fighting the urge to bite at her fingernails until she could know whether the day's horror was to be the mother of victory or defeat. She was hardly the only royal, even among Lycaonese, who did not take to the field themselves. Yet she had always felt it as a manner of failure on her part. Her mother had fought in the ranks, sword in hand. She'd died there too, though, leaving Cordelia to rule Rhenia alone all too soon. It still reeked of sending people to die in her name, a feeling she guiltily despised all the more for the way it held a grain of truth.

And now here, at the edge of the world, she still sat behind wards and walls as she waited for news of the battle unfolding inside the Crown of the Dead.

She had done her best to ensure that she could get swift word. At each gatehouse she had a group of messengers and a loose net of them through the entire ring camp that would serve as a relay to get developments to her quickly. It was how she'd learned that the League's offensive had stalled, only for Basilia to break the stalemate after heavy losses for the Bellerophans. She had learned of it too late for her tastes, though, and the further the armies got into the city the less she heard. Marshal Juniper had allowed an observer in her command tent as what Cordelia would like to take as a gesture of goodwill but was most likely Catherine's order, which helped, but only so much.

Messengers now had to venture into Keter, following the armies through besieged lines and dangers. Half of them never returned and those that came back did not always have much more information to share than what their eyes could gather: officers on the ground had more important duties to handle than speaking to her messengers and Cordelia was no longer First Prince. She

could be ignored, now, dismissed. Her displeasure no longer had the old sting to it.

What she did learn came in waves. There had been an attempt to encircle and destroy Principate forces that'd been beaten back with General Abigail's timely help. The Clans had broken through all opposition coming in from the west and reached the walls. The Dominion, serving as the Black Knight's rear guard, had seen some heavy fighting. The last word she'd gotten was that the Titan had reached the walls, though she had no real notion of whether or not the ancient mage had silenced the Dead King's magical defences as he had promised to. Still, in at least one regard Cordelia had learned in advance of generals and officers instead of the other way around.

Out in the Ossuary the dwarves had sent up the first of two agreed-upon signals: the Herald of the Deeps had reached the ritual site below the city. The second signal, which would signify the site had been destroyed, had yet to follow. No doubt the Enemy had fortified the position thoroughly, so it could be some time yet before it fell – the very reason Kreios' presence was necessary, since the 'entropy fields' were certain to activate before then.

Cordelia could only imagine, the very reason she was sitting at the table with sheaths of papers before her and trying very hard to think of anything except the possibility that the Grand Alliance would lose. Armies had made it to the inner wall, she knew, and even broken through. But the fighting would only get harder from there, with little room for retreat as the dead still in the outer city tore through the rearguards. Yet she had not wanted to spend the entire battle reminding herself she had been better raised than to bite her nails, which was why she'd brought out a quill and inkwell so she might lay out proposals for the tax system of Cardinal one it was built.

The attendant territory of the city, after all, would be much too small to sustain it should the seat of the Accords grow to the expected size. The princess had been considering the respective merits of tariffs and whether quarries might be a possible source of revenue for some time, but even as she tried to make herself look at the papers she found her attention straying. In the margin of a section on the dangers of imposing punitive tariffs when a trade crossroads was just beginning, she'd found that her hand was tallying losses. How many soldiers dead, how bad were the odds getting? Cordelia's attention was failing, the only saving grace being that Brother Simon had been too polite to comment on it.

She sighed, giving it up for a lost cause, and set down the quill.

"The waiting is always the worst part," Simon de Gorgeault quietly said.

"I sometimes feel I have done nothing else all my life," Cordelia tiredly admitted. "Just years and years of waiting in between a few days of haste."

The once-spymaster sympathetically nodded.

"I have found prayer a comfort in moments like these," Simon said, "but I suspect you'd not share the inclination."

"I like the Gods to stay in their Heavens," Cordelia smiled. "The Highest Assembly's floor is crowded enough without them taking up seats."

"Blasphemy," the lay brother said, though his tone was amused.

It was not that the princess did not believe in the virtue of the Gods Above and the worth of their teachings, but rather that she'd never thought of miracles as a solution. Miracles were passing things, beautiful but ephemeral, and you could not build on such a foundation. Prayer was good and worthy thing, but Lycaonese knew better than to rely on it when spring arrived and the Chain of Hunger came calling. Or perhaps that was only a conceit, Cordelia Hasenbach thought as she touched the bracelet of rattling teeth digging into her wrist under her sleeve, as she felt a folded parchment burning against the warmth of her breast.

Perhaps it was just a different kind of prayer, to wear the last gifts of those she had loved and hope they would see her through the storm. Friedrich Papenheim's small act of kindness had stayed with her since she was fourteen, and now Agnes Hasenbach's last words were to remain against her skin until she knew it was time to read them. One last augury from another cousin she had loved, another kin devoured by this black war. Deep down, Cordelia was relieved she would be abdicating Rhenia and Hannover to Otto Reitzenberg. She feared returning north and seeing only a land of empty seats and silences, the expression of everything and everyone she had lost.

"They will breach the inner city soon, if they have not already," Brother Simon told her, looking past the entrance of the tent and into the emptied camp around them. "The first inklings of victory will soon arrive."

Or defeat, she thought, but the former spy was a hopeful man at heart. Cordelia rose to her feet, moving towards the carafe of water at the other end of the table, and cocked a questioning eyebrow at her companion. He shook his head so she poured a cup only for herself, debating whether or not she should force herself to attempt working again, when the sound began. It was a small thing, at first, like a faint chirp. Only it swelled and

grew, turning from whisper to word to scream, and the princess abandoned a half-empty cup to walk out of the tent. In the distance, past the edge of the camp, she saw only the heavy smoke rising from the chasm.

It had been this way for hours, the magics of the dwarves lighting up the foul emanations as if an entire Hell had been unleashed far below. Yet Cordelia's cool blue eyes narrowed as she realized that it was not only smoke she was looking at now. There was movement there, half-hidden by the obscuring curtains.

The first to come out was a bird, a simple sparrow that flew out of the smoke, but the sight of it had dread pooling in her stomach.

A wave followed, dead birds and insects pouring out of the depths of the chasm like a tidal wave that swept over the camp. It was so thick it cast a shadow, hiding away the sun, and hulking shapes began to swim in the sea of death like great whales. Winged wyrms and flocks of vultures, but also creatures shaped like boxes of bone kept aflight by balloon-like breathing lungs. And not so much as a single fly moved towards Keter, towards the fighting in the city and the armies coming for the Dead King's head. They all converged in one direction. Cordelia Hasenbach breathed out as the Enemy's hordes came for the weapon she had kept as a knife to his throat.

"Bring up the battle wards," the princess ordered, voice eerily calm. "And get into position."

Fear had frozen her soldiers at the sight of what was headed for them, despair at numbers they knew they could not beat, but her voice woke them. There were salutes and captains began to shout orders, sorcery flaring as mages put up every layer of defence they still could. The Hidden Horror feared the ealamal, Cordelia thought. He was coming to destroy it. Even if her life had not been in the balance, it would have been as fine a reason as any to fight to the last defending it. Her fingers reached for her heart and the parchment folded against it, but the fair-haired Lycaonese forced herself to pull away. It was not yet time. She tore her eyes away from the swarm, turning to Brother Simon.

A brave man, the spy, who was looking at the tide of death much as one might look at inclement weather.

"I will have to trouble you, Simon," she said.

"What for, my lady?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"A sword," Cordelia Hasenbach grimly said.

If the ealamal was overrun and the battle about to be lost, she may well have no choice but to pull the trigger. But she would



not let fear own her, not when she bore on her the last wills of her cousins. She was, for all her years in the south, still Lycaonese.

She'd fight until the end of the world.

## Interlude: Legends IV

*"One hundred ninety-nine: this list began with the simplest of axioms, the first. In the years since others like you have added to or taken away from it, a chain that goes back further than any of us know, changing and twisting as it grows. In time no two list will be the same, save always in this one regard: there is no two hundredth axiom. That place remains empty, so that once you learn something worth passing down you may fill it yourself. Look forward, as we once did, and let those who come after you learn from our mistakes. What greater gift can there be?"*

– *"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown*

It would be a balancing act in two parts.

The first was the war without, the battle against the Dead King. The Black Knight had learned from yesterday's fighting, undone as it had come, but so had the enemy. Still Waters had been revealed, its strength against the Dead King's armies laid bare, and even as High Marshal Nim had adjusted her tactics so had the ancient lich. Though he could not stop her dead soldiers from rising as wights, the trails of alchemy once dropped over enemy formations to turn them wild had lost effect: the skeletons and ghouls simply dropped once touched by the compound. A Wolofite mage by the name of Kendi Akaze had theorized the effect was automated, added to sorcery that had raised the undead, and Lady Sheriff had confirmed it after a few experiments.

It made the weapon more lethal, true, but took away from it the most useful property: being able to turn Keter's numbers against it. Akaze, who must have impressed the cantankerous old mage, had been drafted as her assistant while she tried to find a way to exploit the Dead King's most recent spellwork. It had smacked of an apprenticeship in the making to all witnesses. The Black Knight hoped for their success, as she could use the help: Keter had learned how turn the advance up the avenue leading to the inner wall into a murderous slog. Nearly half the undead mages in the city had been concentrated in the path of their offensive, hitting away at the flying fortresses with rituals to keep them away so they couldn't lend support, and worse still was the engines.

The last third of the avenue was a road no more, a space of collapsed houses three miles wide and two long having been created, and the reason why was clear: batteries of siege engines were bristling on the inner wall, waiting to hammer away at any soldiers that began to walk across the open, broken grounds before the rampart.

The second was the war within, the struggle for the Praes that was to be. There were parts of the land that did not even yet know the Dread Empire was now the Confederation and the Black Knight knew well how fragile the bargains struck in the Tower's dying light still was. It stood only so long as the Warden loomed tall over all the schemers hungry for more, so long as the Legions of Terror remained the greatest army in the land. Else when they all came home, the High Lords might look at a weakened force under Nim and the chancellor and decide that perhaps they wanted to be Dread Emperor after all. That supreme rule was worth the risks of a war. They had all agreed to disband all armies save the Legions, but how much was their word really worth?

So the Black Knight must make sure none of them thought they'd be able to win that war, when temptation came calling. That meant spending their house troops, their levies, and preserving the strength of her legions. Only it could not be obvious, or wasteful, for otherwise they would be well within their rights to rebel at such treatment – for all that the private armies were now officially auxiliaries under the Legions, the way their noble commanders still led them proved how thin a pretence that truly was. So Nim must balance need and dues, all the while keeping her eye on what must be done to win the battle without lest the battle within ruin it.

It was a difficult exercise, but the Black Knight had found that she was equal to it. Her Name burned at the challenge, alive in a way it had never been when Amadeus still lived and his shadow was still cast over all who would wear his old mantle. It was one decision after another, another puzzle to move around until all the pieces fit the right way.

"The Fourteenth is getting mauled," her Staff Tribune told her. "Their mages are being tied down by hexenghoul's so buzzards can land behind the ranks. They're too far out on the flank, ma'am, it could turn south on us."

The flying constructs would open their belly when they laded, spewing out the cargo of undead they'd carried and so effectively cutting off the Fourteen from the rest of Nim's forces. Or at least potentially so, if they were allowed to build up numbers long enough. Best to take care of that quickly.

"Inform High Lord Dakarai that he is to commit the wavemen," the Black Knight said. "Free use of enchanted arrows is allowed."

Nok's archers, the finest in all of Praes, should be able to clear out the enemy with concentrated volleys if they had permission to dip into fire arrows. Her Staff Tribune nodded, committing the words to memory.

"And send word to the Old Mothers," she calmly added. "When the dead turn their rituals on the wavemen, I want the fortresses to unleash their full spellfire volume at the enemy cabals while they're open."

It happened as she had foreseen, and even as the Black Knight's Name smiled coldly and smoke rose from the ranks of the wavemen, her vanguard – Aksum's forces, nearly half of which were wights by now due to attrition – pushed forward three blocks during the lull in enemy spells.

"The grounds were trapped ahead of the vanguard," her Staff Tribune told her. "Pit traps and caltrops. Beorns are hitting Aksum over them while the ranks are in disarray."

Pit traps that the wights would fall into blindly, caltrops that would tear through the too-light foot armour of the Aksum levies when they tread on them. Beorns, massive distended bear constructs that they were, would be able to ignore both and spit out the dead they carried straight into the wavering Aksumite ranks.

"Send word to High Lady Abreha to withdraw," Nim said.

"The beorns will trample all over her retreat," her Staff Tribune noted. "Casualties will be steep."

"They'll rout before long anyway," the Black Knight said. "But while her levies are being rampaged over, tell General Sacker she is free to fire with her ballistae while the Ninth replaces the vanguard. Unravellers included, after a round of ranging shots."

The unravellers would quickly end the constructs, and the Ninth was still heavy on sappers compared to most legions: there was no better force at her command to get rid of the traps and unearth further ones. A high number of goblins, though, would mean a degree of fragility.

"Have one of the fortresses pass over the streets in front of the traps," she added, frowning. "Still Water the area."

That should allow Sacker long enough to clear the mess before being hammered. It went better than the Black Knight had thought it would: Abreha unleashed beasts she had been keeping in reserve to protect her retreat, slinking panthers made of shadow whose claws rent constricts asunder as they moved across the battlefield like ghosts. The beorns began lashing out blindly, leaving them easy prey for the ballistae, and the Ninth struck

fast in the wake of the flying fortress' path. The army pushed up another four blocks, and now High Marshal was so close to the open grounds she could taste it.

"The Levantines report movement at our back," her Staff Tribune said. "Lady Osená requests instructions."

"Tell her to dig in behind us," Nim grunted. "We'll need them to handle the rearguard while we storm the inner wall."

The tall ogre cast a frown at the battlefield, watching as the Ninth clawed its way up another block and General Wheeler's Eighth gained ground on the left flank. Too much, she thought. Keter was folding too quickly, though on the ground it must have looked only like a successful push. The Eighth's cognomen was not 'Trailblazers' without reason, however, and given ground to take they would take it all too fast. Someone on the other side had read Wheeler just right. The order for the goblin general to pull back was on the tip of her tongue, but then she thought twice.

"Tell Wheeler to push..." she trailed off, gauging the distance with her eye, "half a mile forward, then lean on his sappers to blow through the houses and turn straight south instead."

That way the Eighth would hit the position the Ninth was about to ruin itself on from the side, enough to relieve the pressure and allow Sacker to break through without ruining herself. More importantly, the half mile forward would make room for another maneuver.

"And inform High Lord Sargon that Wolof is to fill the gap when the Eighth swings south," the Black Knight smiled. "He is free to use sorcery as he wills so long as he pushes no further."

And if the High Marshal was reading the timing right Wheeler would get out of the trap just before its jaws closed, just in time for Sargon Sahelian to be left holding the bag instead. Wolof would react to the assault with massed sorcery, as they always did, which in turn would clear masses of skeletons quickly enough that the Eighth would be pivoting into surprised enemies whose reinforcements would be delayed.

"I'll see it done, Lady Black," her Staff Tribune swore.

On this last one, Black Knight saw, she had been a little off. The Eighth did get out in time, but it was actually too early: the first moments of the pivot, as sappers blasted through houses so that ranks of regular could advance through the rubble, were severely punished by the enemy. The sappers took a beating. But when Wolof moved into place and the enemy trap was sprung – shallow tunnels were revealed in a loose circle around the Wolofite position, a horde emerging in moments – the ensuing storm of sorcery did as she had foreseen. With the pressure

alleviated, Wheeler broke through and struck hard at the enemy flank while Sacker pushed up the avenue.

Five blocks in half an hour, and as the Black Knight watched with a cold smile her vanguard finally reached the open grounds under the siege engines that the dead had prepared to break her army. It was time, then. Nim Mardottir's fingers closed around the haft of her war hammer and she rose to her feet. She would lead from the front, now, lead the assault on the wall. But before that, she would show Keter why it was that she had kept her flying fortresses back the entire battle.

"Staff Tribune," the Black Knight said, "pass my order to all fortresses."

"Ma'am?"

"Sunset," she said. "Begin immediately."

And as the order went up, the massive floating castles began to move. Forward, at first, but then *downwards*. Streaks of magic shot up from the ground, Keter's rituals pounding away at the stone and protective enchantments. They tore out chunks, blew through walls and burned hundreds alive. Even crashed one of the smaller towers. Yet most of them kept moving, kept coming down, and as the Black Knight rested her hammer against her shoulder she watched the massive piles of stone land with such thundering crashes they would never rise again. The first of the Old Mothers landed in front of the inner wall's gatehouse, the fortress gate facing the Dead King's own, and the rest of the castles fell like a curtain behind the enemy wall.

To cut it off from reinforcements just before the Praesi assault began.

The Black Knight of Praes raised her war hammer, and half a hundred thousand voices screamed themselves hoarse. Forward they went, to find one of the two fates the Wasteland taught its children: victory and death.

—

Hanno could not save everyone.

The world was not so simple that strength alone would be enough to end all its ills, chase pain and misery out of Creation like spring leaning. He could not even save everyone in front of him, he was forced to admit as he moved from struggle to struggle across this cursed city of the dead and dying. For every man he arrived in time to keep from the enemy's blades another died, be it to arrow or poison or the fangs of some howling ghoul. It was like trying to put out a forest fire with a cup of water. But still he tried, grasping tight that moment of clarity he had

found when he cast aside the coin. Even if it was hard, even if it was thankless, he would act. He would not be able to save everyone, but that was never an excuse not to try.

So Hanno of Arwad picked up his cup and fought the blaze, undaunted, until Creation saw fit to acknowledge his conviction: **Save**, his soul sang out.

It was as if he'd opened his eyes for the first time. All around him he felt the war between doom and hope, the balance of victory and defeat between them, and for all that all of Keter was balance on the precipice of catastrophe he had never seen anything so beautiful. Hundreds of thousands from all over Calernia had come to this place, this day, and in the face of the darkness they fought tooth and nail to turn back the tide. It was like watching a sea of candles warring on the night.

And when Hanno saw the balance moved towards doom, his body began to move before his mind had even come to the decision. He cut through the streets and across rooftops, snatching life back from death where he could, until he found the battle to be won. Rozala Malanza, hard-eyed and defiant as she faced a Revenant with nothing more than banner and bravery, was to give her life to save Procer. And it might succeed, Hanno knew, for a time. But the world would darken for her passing and he could stop it, so he did. It felt natural to step in, to break the Revenant's arm and boil its inside in a flash of Light. Never before had the Light come so easy to his call or his body been so light. The aspect, he decided. It was not simple sight.

Within moments of the Revenant ending, Hanno saw the tide begin to turn again to the north. Doom was clawing back the day, so the hero moved again. **Save**, his soul sang, and he raced against the dark. Hadn't he all his life?

It was not a straight path. Again and again he went to the side, cradling another flame against his palms so it would not blow out. A handful of conscripts surrounded in a ditch, fighting under a dipping banner. A lone fantassin in a garish striped vest of orange and green, drowning in their own blood as a Revenant speared their limbs – and coming into a Name as Hanno cauterized their wound with Light, gasping out in pain. A company of Nicaeans being trampled by a tusk, a pair of Helikeans desperately fighting to bring back the unconscious body of a woman in general's armour. Delosi mercenaries grimly protecting a stripe-cheeked corpse from an onslaught of ghouls. Each a candle, an inch of Creation reclaimed from the dark.

Doom was approaching, strengthening, so Hanno lengthened his stride. He did not even break it when he smashed through a pack of hexenghouls, pulling one off a richly armoured Taghreb girl just before it sank its fangs into her throat. Even as she called out in relief and surprise he kept moving, ignoring her shouts

and that of be beleaguered retinue to duck under an arch just before it fell and blocked the way across the street. He grabbed a loose stone jutting out from a wall, using it to drag himself up on the roof just in time to see a bearded man and an old woman in robes dissecting a corpse atop rooftiles turned to glass. Their cries of triumph turned into dismay when miasma came pouring out, Hanno loosing a spear of Light into the cloud without batting an eye.

It dispersed and leapt down the roof before they could even see his face, landing on a beorn's back and carving through the construct's head. It collapsed forward, sliding down the sloped street and bringing him right before the ragged ranks of a warband of painted Levantines. They parted ranks as he jumped past them and sped up, feeling the call to be so very close now. He turned the corner fast enough his boot slid in the ash, eyes already on the fight ahead of him. The two of them fought back-to-back. Aquiline Osená moving in a sinuous blur of green and bronze, hooked sword blunt from having hewn too many heads open. Razin Tanja in grey and crimson, patient and measured as he killed in sharp strikes. The dead were swarming them, a battered warband collapsing around the lovers as skeletons climbed over the corpses of hundreds of Levantines.

An ambush had been sprung here, the Dead King come to take the lives of the Blood. *One of you could live*, Hanno thought, *if they ran for it. But you never even thought of it, did you?*

His aspect pounding inside of him like a marching drum, Hanno charged in. It was a blur as he moved with Light shivering down his legs, darting forward between blows as he smashed his way through the ranks of the dead. They began to throw themselves at him, to slow him down and tangle his legs, but Hanno let out a grunt and flared Light. His veins burned but the undead fled the pain, leaving him just enough room to push through and then... three steps and he swung, arm outstretched as the very tip of his sword brushed the arrow's side. Enough to foul it, enough that it went wide instead of going through Razin Tanja's open mouth. Hanno laughed, triumphant, for the tide was turning against doom.

He had saved candles, today, but these two felt like a torch.

"Retreat," Hanno told them.

"Lord White," Lady Aquiline said, "I give honour to your deed, but there are too many for-"

"There could be a thousand more," Hanno of Arwad said, "and today it would not be enough. Retreat, my lady of Tartessos. They will not pass by me."

He turned towards the tide, smiling, and flicked his sword to batter a javelin aside as the dead surged forward. Hanno returned

to the fight, like a sword returning to the anvil, and in the back of his mind the song began again. **Save**, it prayed.

The day was not over, and neither was the labour of his hands.

—

When so many Named fought, it was near impossible to keep track of everything.

Akua had only added near because the Carrion Lord had been famous for doing exactly that and Catherine was slowly reaching those heights herself. She herself did not have that capacity, to her displeasure, so instead of frittering away her focus the sorcerers kept to her objective: collapsing the defences around the ward anchor. The house where she believed that the stone would be held had no entrance, large stones having been dragged to cover all of them, and there Akua believed she had found a weakness. Walls and even roof tiles could be enchanted defensively with some degree of strength, but a slab of stone? Not anywhere as well.

Knowing she would not twice get an opening, Akua waited for her moment. The Vagrant Spear was keeping the Twins busy, killing them almost fast as they came back to life as her spear blurred too swiftly for the naked eye to follow, and the Red Knight had barreled into the pack of Revenants that had chased Indrani and Akua for half an hour before this: all of them armed with spears and bedecked in bronze armour, they moved with eerie coordination. The sorcerers suspected only one of them had actually been Named but that an aspect was being used to share their strength, not that it seemed to matter to the Red Knight.

**“Devour,”** she snarled, ripping out a chunk of the necromancy keep the undead moving.

The strength she’d stolen healed the gut wound she’d taken from a spear and with scornful laughter the villainess began hammering into the Revenants again. Rooftops to Akua’s left kept shattering as the Lord of Silent Steps chased a wary Seelie, keeping her out of the fight as Archer and the Harrowed Witch tried their luck with the war anchor’s guardian: a broad woman in gaudy golden plate wielding an equally golden armour, her open-faced helmet adorned with a red feather. Indrani was being thrown off the roof again, but the Harrowed Witch moved her spectre in the way to catch her and toss her back into the fight. It was, Akua decided, as good an opening as she was likely to get.

Though it felt uninspired and somewhat pedestrian to use an entropy curse when the Dead King had displayed a greater work along the same lines in this very city, it was the best tool Akua had to remove the stone slab before the door. She did not speak the incantation, remaining hidden as she cast. It struck



suddenly, withering first the magic the stone had been filled with in order to harden it and only then beginning to hollow out the slab from the inside. This, naturally, drew attention. The golden Revenant, ignoring Indrani's knife as it scraped harmlessly against her armour, leapt down from the roof and ran towards her.

"A source detection array, I see," Akua noted. "Unfortunate."

She raised her wrists, speaking three words of power, and flicked them at the golden nuisance. The Revenant ducked into an empty house, but Akua hardly minded as he true target – the hollowed out stone – exploded in a burst of shard.

"Ivah," Akua shouted. "The anchor."

The golden Revenant then burst through the wall to her left, which Akua would admit to surprising her a tad, but Indrani had it in hand. Archer, thrown by the Witch's spectre, landed on the Revenant's back. She began stabbing at the golden wretch's helmet, and for once the Revenant bothered to defend herself. Her hands were covering her head and Akua's eyes narrowed even as Indrani was tossed through a doorway on the other side of the street, ferociously cursing all the way. The golden-armoured halberdier lowered her weapon at Akua, who had yet to move so much as an inch.

"Proceran, were you?" the golden-eyed sorceress drawled.

The golden Revenant charged, batting aside a spectre and in the same swing an arrow Archer had shot at her. Akua, instead of panicking as the distance closed, raised two hands and began to incant a simple fire cantrip even as her other hand traced a High Arcana rune. She unleashed the strong spell first, a burst of force that the halberdier took head on. It slowed the Revenant just enough for the second spell to land even as the halberd pierced forward towards Akua. A small flame caught the red feather, which turned to ash in a heartbeat. And in the heartbeat after that, the golden halberd and golden plate *also* turned to ash.

"You must have been," Akua mused, "for only a Jaquinite wizard would have added such a painfully obvious unravelling clause to an artefact. Gods Below, I've seen greater subtlety from Callowan nobles – and *their* idea of trickery is a massive cavalry charge from the back instead of the front."

Admittedly it was somewhat embarrassing how often that trick had defeated Praesi armies, but that was neither here nor there. The half-globe of forced revealed by traces of dust suddenly flickered and died as Ivah finished what she had requested of him, the ward collapsing without its anchor, and the Dead King proved to be a sore loser when the Tumult dropped another column

of lightning atop that house. Ivah would survive, she had not doubt. Mighty of its strength were exceptionally difficult to kill by conventional means. The once-golden Revenant was still charging at her, but Akua raised her wrists again and she threw herself to the side – never noticing that Akua had never actually called on magic before Archer leapt into the whole to return the beatings she'd had doled out to her earlier in the fight. Throwing out a set of transparent shields around herself out of caution, Akua began to walk down the street.

Helping the Vagrant Spear out should end this faster, she mused, and then they could get out of here before more Scourges showed up. She dismissed half her shield, beginning the incantation for a curse of withering, and then one of the enchanted gems under her armour shattered as a protective spell took the strike that should have severed her spine. Akua spun wildly, tossing a ball of flame in the Seelie's face, but all it did was break an illusion. A strike that should have slipped between her ribs killed another gem, her last before she began bleeding, and there she landed a spell that blew a stream of heated ashes in the Scourge's face. Only the Seelie hadn't ducked because she was doing something else: cutting off one of the straps keeping the box on Akua's back.

"No," she hissed, sword clearing the scabbard as she wildly swung the box rattled at her back.

The Crown of Autumn would not break, but if they got to the box... Archer burst out of the house, blades out, and Akua saw it all unfold with clarity. The Seelie ripped the box off her back as Akua slashed across her face, the metal contained landing on the street. There was a whistling sound as the missiles of the javelineer Revenant, which she'd thought destroyed by the Red Knight earlier, began to fall. And even as Akua screamed out an incantation, the Seelie's knife whipped about and slid past her guard. It would open her throat. Archer stilled for a moment, halfway there, as they both saw the same thing: a javelin would hit the box. The crown. And Indrani could not be at two places at once.

Akua breathed out, closing her eyes.

Only she did not die. Instead as she sucked in a desperate breath the Seelie was tossed aside like a rag doll, Indrani getting in between the two of them, and with utter horror Akua watched as a javelin puncture the metal box. Went straight through, as if it were parchment, and these were not the javelins from earlier. This one was black stone, like the steles the Dead King sometimes used, and as Akua watched with dread as it craved through the crown itself. Cut it cleanly in half, two ornate half-circles of bronze. She went still as a stone even as there were shouts of surprise, Revenants withdrawing from the fight all over. They

fled, leaving the two of them looking down at a disaster that might well kill every soul on Calernia.

Archer was the one who broke the silence.

"I don't regret it," she said, almost defiant.

"My life was not worth this," Akua said, throat tight. "Indrani, Gods. It could not have been worth *this*."

"I'd do it again," her friend said.

And for once in her life, Akua Sahelian believed every word of what she had been told.

—

There were few places on a battlefield more dangerous to be than inside a siege tower.

The finest engineers of the Legions had spent decades trying to make them less of a death trap, experimenting with materials and protections and spell shielding, but in the end the essence of what a siege tower was wouldn't change: a slow, tight box advancing in the direction of enemies with the means to shoot holes into it. The entire tower rattled as yet another spell hit it in the belly, the Black Knight's fingers tightening around her hammer as she heard wood crack and screams erupt. The enemy had cracked the shell. Nim kept her dismay off her face so that her retinue would not see it, chewing the inside of her cheek and prayed that the tower had made it close enough to the rampart the enemy would not have enough time to topple it.

Another shudder beneath her feet as hoarse shouts filled the air and magic crackled, the dead and that of the Legion mages. Nim could smell smoke, which had her stomach clenching. The wood of the tower had been made proof to conventional fire, but that was not what Keter was wielding. If the flames caught... She would have trust in her mages and sappers to be able to put it out. As if to reward the thought, a moment later there was a shout from upstairs.

"READY!"

The Black Knight allowed herself a smile, steadying her footing as the ogres around her did the same. A heartbeat later, there were to metallic clangs in quick succession. The first came as the wall before her fell down, turning into a bridge that led straight into a rampart filled with undead. The second came as a pair of hooks slammed down onto the top of the wall, anchoring the siege tower to it. Further down there would be steel spikes jutting out to the same purpose, enchanted so they would be able to sink into even warded stone, but the High Marshal did not wait

to hear their song. Instead she strode forward, hammer in hand, and brushed past her soldiers to charge into the midst of the enemy.

To fight the likes of these was as reaping wheat.

Every swing of her hammer shattered a handful, and as her personal guard charged in her wake the enemy ranks vanished like mist. Nim barely even drew on her Name, relying on simple strength and training, but like so many before them the dead crumbled under ogres' hammers. It could not have taken longer than thirty heartbeats for them to clear out a foothold, and the Black Knight felt oddly cheated: she could not have swung her weapon more than a dozen times. She cast a look further down the rampart, seeing three of the five other siege towers had made it to the wall. The other two were wrecks, one afire and spilling out corpses.

"Secure the wall," the Black Knight roared. "Hammers, with me! We take the gatehouse."

The fighting there was fiercer, she could tell already. The stone was shaking from the impact of the enchanted ram hammering at the gate through the crashed fortress' entrance, but atop the crenelled gatehouse a furious melee had burst out. Even the waves of fire and lighting from atop the crashed fortress were not enough for the Taghreb household troops to gain the advantage, matched as they were by withering curses and a monstrous new kind of ghoul. Even as the Black Knight hurried into the fight, she grimaced at the sight of a flesh-red ghoul devouring a corpse and soon after beginning to vomit out another ghoul.

It wasn't those the High Marshal sought, though, as her guard smashed into the enemy's flank and shattered the shield wall hastily raised in their path. Leading the enemy ranks was a tall silhouette, a Revenant in garish blue scale mail wielding a long barbed spear. He was kept snatching the lives of Taghreb officers, spreading panic so their ranks wouldn't form up, and the Black Knight would have no more of it. A ghoul snapped at her heels but she batted it away with the back of her hand, tramping skeletons beneath her feet as she charged. The Revenant turned even as she raised her war hammer, spear darting out, but Nim kicked a skeleton into the way – and, while the bones blocked the Revenant's sight, smashed it from the side.

It took the blow in the shoulder, but to her surprise did not crumple. That blue armour must be enchanted, and though the Revenant was tossed a dozen feet back it landed on its feet and was back on the move in a heartbeat.

"Fine," the Black Knight growled. "The hard way, then."

It feinted high but Nim had fought spearmen before and saw the thrust coming for her knee. Humans always through ogres were slow with their limbs, because of the weight, but that was only half true. The Black Knight might not move as quick, but she covered a lot more ground: a flick of the wrist had her hammer's shaft swatting aside the spear. She added a second hand to the length of wood and turned the movement into a twirl that came down right on the Revenant's head, hammering it onto the floor. Its knees bent, but that helm must have been enchanted too for it did not break. It didn't matter. That heartbeat where it was as a hammered nail had been all she needed: she dropped her weapon, instead grabbing it by the throat.

The Revenant stabbed away at her but the angle was all wrong, the barbed spear sliding off the side of her plate as the Black Knight grunted with exertion. One hand on the throat and the other on the body she pulled, pulled until there was a wet cracking sound. The Revenant screamed, its spear rending deep scars into her armour, but Nim let out a roar of triumph as finally she ripped the undead apart: the head went off like a rag doll's, the bones having broken where the armour would not. She held up the body as a banner, her guard roaring back and the fervour spreading into the beleaguered Taghreb ranks. *At this rate, she thought, the gatehouse would be theirs in half an hour.* After that all that was left was to push into the inner city and...

It was a pull at her hand that save her land, an instinct that had her moving before her body could know it should. She got the blue-armoured corpse in the way, the greatsword shattering the scales and still managing to knock her off her feet through it. She fell, crushing a skeleton and a Taghreb levy under her as she reached for her hammer and swung wildly at the silhouette standing over her. The Prince of Bones contemptuously took the blow on the side of his massive blade and swung back a riposte that ripped Nim's helm off her head along with a chunk of her brow. A blast of fire rocked the Scourge as she swallowed a hiss of pain and scrabbled back to her feet.

The Prince of Bones. How the Hells had she missed the largest of the Revenants sneaking up on her? *Illusion, had to be.* Which meant she was fighting two dangerous foes instead of one.

"Rituals on my position," the Black Knight shouted, trusting in her subordinates to carry the word.

The Scourge swept forward through its own soldiers, heedless of what it broke, and Nim warily stepped back as she wiped away the trails of blood getting into her eye. The Prince of Bones' sword rose, but behind her magic crackled and the Black Knight grunted in satisfaction: waves of fire slammed down on their position, not doing much to either of them as it incinerated skeletons left and right. But as the smoke and ash billowed outwards, the

outline of a cloaked figure behind the Scourge was revealed. The illusionist. Wasting no time, Nim circled around the looming Prince and made straight for the other Revenant.

It was backpedalling in a hurry, throwing at her spells that burned searing lights into her eyes and filled her ears with cacophonous noise, but the Black Knight grit her teeth and barreled through. Batting aside the ghouls in the way with a flick of her hammer, she pivoted into a downwards swing – in time for the instinct to pull at her again. She threw herself back, abandoning the hammer, and through the pack of ghouls already swarming her exposed head saw that large greatsword swinging through where she'd just stood. *The ritual exposed nothing*, she realized. *It was an illusion all along*. She'd been played. Tearing off the ghouls nipping at her face, their fangs tearing up her thick skin, she rolled to the side as the Prince of Bones struck powerfully enough to shatter the stone beneath the blow. But how could she trust her eyes? Any moment now there could be a killing stroke, a-

A burst of blinding Light darkened her vision for a moment, but through her squint she saw a man tear into the enemy's side, ignoring ghouls to strike at a particular skeleton. And as Hanno of Arwad's blade sent the hidden Revenant's head tumbling, all illusions shattered and Nim realized she was again about to die. The blow took her in the shoulder, black plate crumbling as the blade's edge failed to cut but still hit with crushing strength. The Black Knight screamed hoarsely and grabbed the Scourge's sword hand as it pulled back, knowing another blow would be the end of her. The Prince shifted his footing but Nim often sparred with other ogres. She knew what it meant in an opponent her size.

She half-rolled out of the way of the punch and used the opening to catch the throat rim of the Prince of Bones' armour – and its head, she thought, somehow seemed made of newer steel than the rest – to drag herself up. Pitting strength against strength she wrestled down its limbs, but it was a losing fight. The Scourge was heavier than her and implacable: her arms burned, her legs trembled, and inch by inch she was being forced back.

"Do it," the Black Knight screamed. *"Do it now."*

The hero's sword struck the Prince from the back even as she finished the last word, Light roiling and letting out screams as the blade melted its way through layers of steel. Nim's arms gave, the Scourge's arms enveloping her almost intimately before the strength turned crushing. She screamed, ribs snapping like twigs, and spat out blood and phlegm as all four of her lungs were pressed on. But she'd live long enough, she thought even as the Prince tried to turn to shake off the hero and failed – the dark-skinned human turned with it. Enough that the Scourge would die, and then she could get herself healed.

If she still wore her helmet, she would not have seen it. She almost didn't anyway because of the blood blinding on of her eyes, but as she gasped in pain the Black Knight saw the glint of the sun on metal. An arrow. Close, too close for her to avoid and- **Commission**.

—

Hanno could not save everyone.

He had known it from the start, thought he had made his peace with the inevitable. And still a shout ripped itself clear of his throat as the Hawk's arrow took the Black Knight's life. The shaft sunk halfway into the skull, an instant death. He was forced to cease pouring Light into the Prince of Bones' armour as he had been doing, melting layer after layer, to rip out his sword and cut through the arrow that would have gone through the back of his neck. The towering Scourge backed away, swinging his blade more to force distance than strike, but Hanno would have none of it. The edge of his sword flaring with Light he carved through the steel, craning his neck to the side to avoid another killing arrow.

A dart forward had him closing the distance, the Prince of Bones tossing the broken sword in his face. He ducked low, dropping into a roll to avoid another arrow – the Hawk must be close – and slashing across the Scourge's face. The pristine steel mask was scarred, metal melting down from the mark. A leg, Hanno decided. The Prince of Bones was heavy enough that without both legs there would be no escaping. Clouds roiled above his head, magic flaring, but Hanno pressed on. A half-step let the Prince's fist slide past him and he slid under, hacking at the side of the Revenant's leg even as lightning began pouring on them both from above. Hanno grit his teeth, throwing up a burst of Light that dispersed the sorcery over his head as he carved deep into the Prince's leg.

Not deep enough, he thought as he rose behind the Scourge's back. Another arrow swatted aside, but it had been a distraction: darkness fell over him. Hanno grit his teeth, flaring Light through his heated veins enough that the Mantle's curse shattered. Just in time to see the Prince's foot about to hit his stomach. He threw himself below it, a screaming curse shattering the stone he'd been standing on, and as he rose behind the Prince again he listened to the call of instinct and struck out with his hand – catching the Seelie's knife as it was about to thrust through his throat. Letting out an irritated grunt, he bent the Scourge's arm and rested the flat of his blade against he neck.

It was not a mercy: using it as lever, he pushed the Seelie's head into the hole of molten metal he'd left in the Prince of Bones' back.

An arrow hammered into his shoulder, going straight through the plate, and with a pained grunt Hanno let out a burst of Light through the wound to get it out. He'd still lost his opening for a killing blow on the Seelie, who had turned into a bed of dead flowers. Magic was rising again but Hanno had to step out of the way when the Prince snatched up a skeleton and swung it at him like a club, the arc of it covering the Mantle's shivering curse until it was right on him – he desperately pivoted to the side, smashing the pommel of his sword into the Seelie's half-melted face when she reappeared trying to drive her knife into his side. The curse shaved away at his pauldron, rusting the metal to powder, and the Seelie ducked the swing that would have hewn open her skull.

Then the storm hit, and it was all Hanno could do not to be blown right off the wall.

Soldiers behind him were not so lucky, and the dead were scattered by hurricane winds – turned into trebuchet stones as they hammered into Praesi ranks – but Hanno pushed forward, Light burning in his belly. He saw the Prince of Bones retreating, the silhouette fading out of sight, and with a scream of frustration he shaped a spear out of Light and tossed it at the Scourge's back. It missed the mark by a foot, and even as he grit his teeth the Scourges disappeared into the inner city. A full retreat. The Black Knight was dead and he hadn't even taken one of them for it. When the storm ended, leaving shocked Praesi as the victors of the battle for the gatehouse, Hanno trudged back to the ogre's great corpse.

The arrow was still in her skull, the sight of it leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

"If I had struck from the front, I could have reached it with my arm," Hanno murmured. "If I'd continued to listen to **Save** instead of buried myself in the use of the Light..."

Mistakes, though they had not seemed like it at the time. But then they never did, did they? That was why Hanno had one chosen to follow the Seraphim, heeded their answer to the Riddle of Fault. To be mortal was to fail, to make mistakes. The dark-skinned hero knelt by the Black Knight's corpse, jaw clenched, and wondered how many more mistakes still lay ahead of him. Creation quickened around him, looking for resolve or its end, but Hanno did not embrace the bitterness. He had the strength to take the risk of doing the right thing, but that strength was not an absolute. He was but a mortal man, with all the limits that carried. He would not shy away from the truth of what he had chosen: he would fail. He had today, for all the other victories, and would again.

Hanno did not regret trying.



He ripped out the Hawk's arrow, but after he did his hand lingered on the Black Knight's bloodied face. His face fell into a pensive frown. Creation grew heavy. If it wasn't about victory, if it was about doing all the good that you could, then could he really say he was finished? There was one more thing to attempt. Breathing out, the hero let the Light flow through him and into the villain's corpse. He had seen Tariq Isbili used Forgive more than once, and there had been great priests could resurrect without the need of a Name or aspect. As his skin grew warm and he began to sweat, Hanno held a tight hand over the Light he was unleashing. It was about will, about intent – and if he slipped, he would burn the corpse instead of bringing it back to life.

Only, in a moment of clarity, Hanno realized that it was not truly resurrection he sought. It was something simpler, almost childish, but in a way perhaps less shallow. He had made a mistake. She had made a mistake. Perhaps all of Creation had made a mistake.

And Hanno of Award would **Undo** it.

He felt something infinitely larger than him brush against his soul, greater than even the Choir of Judgement, and the aspect lit up inside him. His hand against the Black Knight's body serving as a conduit, he looked for ties to the soul so it might be called back and found... nothing? Light began guttering out even as Hanno heard footsteps behind him, a shadow being cast over his kneeling form. He turned, looking into an ogre's rough face, and was about to speak when he suddenly closed his mouth. Through the fast-fading clarity the aspect had leant him, he saw in that body two souls.

"Black Knight," Hanno evenly said.

"Lord Hanno," she replied. "There will be no need for what I believe you are attempting. Though I will be weakened as I ride my soldier's body, it will serve until my corpse can be made usable again."

It was possession, he thought, but not in the way that he had seen it before. It was not a wraith stealing a body, this had been consented to. Explicitly or implicitly he could not tell, but the mark was there. *This is not necromancy, not really. The principle behind it is different. Like a... chain of command, with replaceable faces.* He suspected the Black Knight would not be able to ride a body that was not one of her soldiers. Inside Hanno's belly the heat began to fade, **Undo** simmering down, and as it did he felt out the edge of the aspect's limits. Once a day, a death or calamity could be undone. How the time was parsed he did yet know, but the limit of use was certain.

All that, he thought, and it had not been needed at all. Hand resting on his wearied brow, Hanno let out a snicker that turned into a quiet laugh.

"I was not needed, after all," he mused.

And maybe that was the lesson he should have been learning all along, he thought. All this time, he had been trying to do it all himself. To keep the heroes on the right path, to keep Calernia from falling. Even before that, from the moment in Ashur where he had first become the White Knight. It had been him and the Seraphim who were to be concerned with the doling out of judgement, but no one else. Even with angels at his shoulder, he had walked alone. Only that wasn't really true, was it? He'd been running around Keter trying to keep doom from claiming the day, trusting in his sword and the aspect he had come into, but that was not the whole of it – just the whole of him. They were all trying to hold up the sky today, and in the end all that Hanno of Arwad could claim to be was a pair of hands. Was it not the worst kind of arrogance, to think that it was on him for everyone to win or lose? Like a child he had decided that he would be strong enough to be able to do the right thing, as if his will was the only one in the world. He was not alone in this. He never had been.

Maybe it was time he acted like it.

"I agonized," Hanno softly told the Black Knight, "over whether or not it was right for me to become the White Knight again. Whether it was going in circles, or nowhere at all."

The ogre did not answer, her eyes wary and her silence thick.

"How very pointless that was," Hanno mused, slowly rising to his feet.

There was no perfect Name that would save everyone, end all the ills of the world. He was just a man and Creation was larger than he would ever know. But he *wasn't* alone. He didn't have to do everything. He just needed to return the trust that had been placed in him. And while the Warden fought today to save the world, then Hanno could fight to save the people in it. To do as much good as he could, knowing that Catherine Foundling would be there to hold out a hand when he failed. Hanno looked around at the last of the dead on the rampart and the gatehouse that would let the Praesi into the inner city when it was opened.

The end was nigh.

"Let's finish this," the White Knight said. "The Dead King awaits."

Akua Sahelian had been entrusted with the fate of Calernia and she had failed it.

Beyond all the excuses that were already springing up in the back of her mind, the justifications and the blame-shifting, that was the stark truth of it. She held in her hand the two pieces of the Crown of Autumn, the entrapping gift that had been meant to relieve the Dead King of his mastery over the dead and end the war in a single stroke. It was broken, irremediably cleaved in two. Only Masego's cleverness in his surgery of the crown had prevented the cleaving from resulting in a wild release of power that would have torn a hole in the city and killed everyone involved in the crown's failed defence.

But as Akua looked upon Hierophant's work split asunder, a thought occurred. A mad thought, impossible, but in the face of extinction that was a meaningless word. And deep down, for all that it was laughable and ludicrous of her, she thought it could be done. That *she* could do it. So instead of falling to her knees, the golden-eyed sorceress turned to her friend. To achieve the impossible would have to be done like eating a whale: one bite at a time, until nothing was left.

"I need you to find me two needles in a haystack, Archer," Akua said. "One that is currently on fire and full of undead."

"My favourite kind," Indrani agreeably replied. "What's your poison, Saucy Siren?"

Beneath the flippancy she sounded relieved. For all that she had defiantly claimed not to regret the decision to save Akua's life over going for the crown, the consequences of that choice loomed tall.

"First, find me a forge," Akua said.

There were hundreds of these across the city, as though Keter's great foundries were in the depths beneath the capital the equipment of the great army encamped within the walls must be seen to regularly lest it rust and break. Most were little more than glorified smithies, but it would be sufficient for her purposes.

"Gotcha," Archer said. "And your other needle?"

"I will tell you after," she replied. "Go."

Indrani made a point of waddling slowly for the first few steps, but as soon as she turned the corner she disappeared in haste. The urgency was not lost on her. Akua, meanwhile, was left to handle another sort of trouble. The remains of the Vagrant Spear's band were standing around the heroine, speaking with Ivah of the Losara.

"- been striking at bands, hit and run," Sidonia told the drow. "Last I heard he got the Astrologer and clipped the Stained Sister."

"It has not yet taken aim at Mighty," the Lord of Silent Steps noted.

Only one name came to mind when the death of Named was so casually brought up: the Hawk. Akua stepped into the talks.

"That is because the Dead King believes he can brush aside the Night if he must," she told them. "He used the Grey Legion to develop protective enchantments against it during the Hainaut offensive."

"Mighty Sahelian," Ivah politely greeted her, inkling its head.

No doubt Sargon would be highly insulted at the implication that Akua was considered the sigil-holder for her family should he ever be made aware of it, a twist of amusement that slightly brightened her mood. The reception from the other three was rather less warm. The Vagrant Spear offered a curt nod, the Red Knight a sneer and the Harrowed Witch looked like she was trying to figure out a way to excuse herself as soon as possible.

"Are any of you in need of healing?" she asked.

An empty question, when she saw that Sidonia was heavily wounded on the side for all that Light had half-cauterized the cuts. The Vagrant Spear eyed her consideringly.

"Can you leave the scars?"

Akua smiled and agreed that she would, laying a hand over the ruined flesh after the Vagrant Spear consented and whispering the incantation.

"Relying on another's skill is weakness," the Red Knight pointedly said.

"Fascinating," Akua charmingly replied, all smiles. "You will have to tell me how you forged your sword, then. And whenever did you get the time to farm the wheat that went into every piece of bread you've eaten?"

The other woman's mouth closed. The Vagrant Spear didn't even bother to hide her grin, which meant it was time to spring her request.

"I will be in need of your help and that of your band, Lady Sidonia," she said.

The heroine tensed, but she could not move away. Not when Akua had carefully ensured she was not done healing.

"What for?" she asked. "The artefact is broken. You must have heard the horns, too, Sahelian. We must gather for the muster in the inner city so we might join the assault on the Dead King."

"An artefact is broken," Akua corrected. "Leaving behind shards and exceptional materials. I have sent Archer to find me a forge so that the defeat we were inflicted might be undone."

"A worthy cause," the Vagrant Spear reluctantly conceded. "Do you need Aspasia's services, then? I could lend her."

Aspasia looked like she would have whimpered if it did not risk drawing attention to her, but that was besides the point. Akua was passingly familiar with the Harrowed Witch's skills, and the other mage's talents were entirely unsuited to what she had in mind. Illusions, blood rituals and necromancy with a spiritual speciality were not what she needed, especially in the hands of a woman whose very Name came with a saboteur attached. Akua would need stability and control most of all. Precision would be everything.

"I need all of you to guard me as I work," Akua replied, shaking her head. "Even the most minute interruption would ruin everything and the Dead King is sure to come for us the moment he grasps what we are attempting."

Lady Sidonia was hesitating, both disinclined to do the Doom of Liesse any favours and hungry to be part of the glorious fight against the Dead King yet recognizing that what Akua was suggesting was of great import. So to tip the balance, the sorceress glanced at Ivah of the Losara. Its face betrayed the barest flicker of amusement before it was smoothed away.

"I will lend my spear to this labour," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "And call for other Mighty to stand vigil."

"We will as well," the Vagrant Spear immediately replied, face hardening.

Pride was such a useful lever to move people with, Akua considered as she allowed the healing sorcery to ebb away. She smiled at Lady Sidonia.

"All finished," she said.

Archer was back before long, having found a forge half a dozen blocks to the east. They all set out that way as Indrani paced around restlessly.

"Your second ask?" Archer pressed.

"I need a Named mage," Akua said.

"You've got the Witch," Indrani pointed out.

"She is unsuited to my needs," she replied. "You must find me another. I can begin the work without them, but I will need them to finish it."

A pause.

"Nahiza Serrif would serve as well, if you can find her," Akua conceded.

Archer chewed the inside of her cheek thoughtfully.

"I'll see who I can rustle up," she promised, and heartbeats later she was gone.

Akua did not allow her thoughts to linger on it. Instead she hurried to the forge, finding the rundown stone house to be dirty and derelict but functional for her purposes. There was still charcoal for the forge in a bag that had been cut, spilling all over the floor, and she used it to light the hearth. A focused wind cantrip blew the dirt and ash off the anvil as she went looking through the tools, thankfully finding them to be steel. Even the hammer's shaft, which made it a little heavy for her hand, but that could be seen to. She needed to enchant them to withstand greater heat anyway, she'd slip in a mild lightening enchantment for the hammer. It was quick and dirty work, burning the runes into the side, but she did not need the tools to last forever – or even to the day's end.

By the time the fire was burning and the tools ready, the enemy had begun attacking.

Akua forced herself to ignore the sounds of fighting. It was not out there she would redeem her mistake but in here. Instead she placed the two prices of the Autumn Crown in the fire, using the bellow to stoke the flames even higher as she kept feeding it charcoal. Though she had once spent a month learning the essentials of smithing as part of being taught enchanting – enchanted swords made without understanding how simpler swords were forged had a tendency to shatter – she was not a trained smith, but then she did not need to be. Akua was not trying to make a functional object, not in the physical sense anyway.

She was changing the appearance of the crown to make it easier to affect its metaphysical nature, using the process of 'being forged anew' as channel to facilitate the work. Simply cutting away at the crown would do nothing. Not only did Akua understand the purpose of barely half of what Masego had done to the fae crown, even broken the artefact remained one of great power and weight. To try to change it without first unmaking it would be the difference between trying to shape stone and clay.

Thrust into the flames, the crown began to bend. The roots in copper and bronze began to twist, the sculpted leaves wilting as

their edges thickened. Nothing was melting, not yet and perhaps ever, but it was softening. Hierophant had hammered dozens of iron nails into the crown, and reaching for the tongs Akua began to remove them. It was difficult work, even with the fire making them easier to rip out, and the heat in her face had her sweating as her muscles burned from the effort. She left only two nails in each half, her magic already feeling out the shards and finding the slumbering power inside was slowly waking up. Soon now.

The noise outside began to reach her ears again as she emerged from her trance, but there was a new note to it. It soon ended, another lull before the storm lapped at their gates again, and the door was thrown open when Archer strolled in. Behind her a young woman followed, dark-haired and tanned in padded battle robes. Of Ashuran make, these, but Akua would have recognized Sapan the Apprentice even without that. Her stomach dropped at the sight of the younger woman. Such a young practitioner with a transitional Name would not have the control she needed in her assistant.

"You getting there?" Archer asked. "It's getting crazy out here. No Scourges yet, but he's throwing Revenants at us by the baker's dozen."

Akua's throat clenched as she wondered how she would have to tell Indrani that they had failed again, that the Apprentice would not be enough, when the young woman walked closer to the fire. Her eyes were curious and Akua stilled at the sight of her. There was something different about her. A certainty that had not been in the girl that trailed behind Hierophant in the hopes of peeking at his notes.

"You are no longer the Apprentice," Akua said.

"I am," Sapan thinly smiled, "the Mage."

Only 'Mage', without anything preceding it. Oh my, Akua thought. Ashurans traditionally had three Names bound to spellcasting: Red Mage, Blue Mage and Silver Mage. The destroyer, the navigator and the healer. Only young Sapan was eschewing the label and the limits that would come with it. Simple as the Name sounded, it was a bold claim that would echo across all rungs of the Ashuran tier system. *A year with Masego*, the sorceress ruefully thought, *was all it took to turn you into something that will rock the foundations of your home*. Hierophant likely hadn't even meant to do it. And the Mage would be a herald of great changes, Akua had no doubt about, because when the other woman had spoken her Name she'd heard smaller note to it.

It was still a transitional Name, a step on the way to a higher peak.

"Good," Akua smiled, allowing a touch of savagery to show. "Come, Mage, for now the true work begins."

Archer returned to the fighting outside, grounds she was more at home on, while the two of them took to the forge. Sapan's control, Akua thought, was exquisite. The girl *had* once trained to be healer. The Soninke sorceress took out the first half from the flames with the tongs and laid it on the anvil, reaching for the hammer even as she instructed her helper.

"Keep it at this exact temperature," Akua ordered. "It must be even throughout all the while."

"To keep it at the point of transition," Sapan thoughtfully murmured.

What a genuine terror that girl would become, in a decade or two. Akua was no proper smith, so her strikes were uneven as held down the half of the crown and hammered away at it. The shape would need to change, else the artefact could only ever be a broken shard of what Hierophant had made. Feeling out the enchantments, the lines drawn in the power slumbering within, Akua broke down the beautiful fae crown. Leaves turned into flat lumps, ornate roots into rough and uneven chords, even as she grasped at the edges of the enchantments. Much of what Masego had done, the beauty and elegance of his work, had to be discarded.

Akua went for simplicity instead, breaking down the parts that would have bound the concepts of 'mastery' and 'death' into mere 'power'. A broad concept, which meant it would have shallow draw if left this way – the artefact would try to do too much at once when having finite strength, resulting in it doing a lot of very little. Which was why Akua, even as she turned the half-crown into a rough bracelet ring of copper and bronze, turned her attention to the two iron nails she had left. Before she hammered them into the ring, with shaky breath she branded them with the whole of her magic. This was High Arcana, not a simple exercise of power and knowledge. It must come from something deeper, something personal.

So Akua let herself remember the absolute nothingness of the void, the maddening nothing that had surrounded her as she half-slumbered a prisoner of the Mantle of Woe.

She bled it into the iron nails, pouring out all the terror and despair of it, and hammered them into the ring until there was no trace of the iron save for two faint circles on the side. The golden-eyed sorceress shuddered, feeling the concept that she had branded into the nails: *chain*. Exhaustion set her limbs to tremble, but Akua had no time for it. She quenched the bronze ring in water, letting it simmer there, and took the other half of the crown from the flames. Her magic was growing sluggish, but the Mage had learned from the first effort. She helped keep the



enchancements in place as Akua wove them anew, hammering the other half of the crown into a matching ring. And again two nails of iron were hammered into circles, singing of 'chain' as the others had.

Into the water the second ring went, and once they were taken out to be laid on the anvil Akua Sahelian beheld her work.

Her metalwork had been without art to it, but even broken the Autumn Crown was one of the great mantles of the fae. Its nature asserted itself anew, what had been plain and bumpy bracelet rings turning into something altogether more beautiful. The roots and leaves she had hammered out had returned, engraving themselves so flawlessly that one might have thought the artefacts made of real ones. The bronze and copper had not melded, the copper instead turning into delicate filigree laying out the veins of leaves or the contour of branches and roots. And on the side of each bracelet ring, each large enough to be slipped around a wrist, two dots of iron remained. Only they had changed, melted by the head into the happenstance of two clasping hands.

A fitting emblem, Akua thought. For she had turned the Hierophant's beautiful work into fetters, making of a gift that would grant immortality at the price of master over death something brutally simple. The rings bound the 'power' of any who bore one, chaining it to the other ring. No power could be used without the consent of whoever held the other end of the chain. It was not a leash, for no ring was master over the other, but instead something altogether uglier.

A prison, large enough for two.

"They are beautiful," the Mage whispered. "Perhaps the greatest work of our age."

"They are the ugliest thing I have ever made," Akua Sahelian quietly replied, "or ever will."

And still she took them in hand, feeling the lingering warmth of them against her skin. She left the smithy, the oppressing heat of it, and returned to the smoky skies of Keter. There Archer awaited, standing over a carpet of corpses dead twice over as Firstborn and Named held the streets.

"Finished?" Indrani asked.

"I am," Akua said.

"Good," Archer sharply nodded. "You'll have to take it from here. I need to *go*."

She was shifting her weight even as she spoke, Akua noticed, so restless she could not stop moving. How odd, the sorceress thought, and then breathed out in wonder. *Ah, my heart*, she fondly thought. *Always a plan within the plan with you*. Catherine had gone with the Ranger, the survivors of Refuge and the man Indrani loved. All essential elements for Indrani to transition out of her increasingly ill-fitting Name of Archer. *In a single stroke you tell me that you are fighting and ensure reinforcements are on your way*. The pull of fate on Indrani at the moment must be like getting dragged by the hair.

"Go," Akua said.

Archer hesitated.

"You're sure you'll be fine on your own?"

"You chose my life over the crown, Indrani," Akua Sahelian gently said. "I swear to any Gods listening that I will not make you regret that choice, so *go*."

The other woman's hazelnut eyes met her own, and after a moment whatever she was looking for she found. She sharply nodded, coat swirling behind her as she turned to leave without a goodbye. She watched Indrani vanish into the city to seek out her fate, leaving her to find her own.

Akua's thumb stroke the side of the ring in her hand, wondering if she was holding a noose or a knot.

## Chapter 64: Gehenna

*"In war you must avoid fighting strength and instead attack weakness. Therefore, an army evenly mediocre cannot be attacked."*

– *Isabella the Mad, Proceran general*

"You know," I said, "given that the first part of this plan was literally going to Hell, I kind of figured that the trouble we'd run into would actually be Hell-related."

Masego cocked his head to the side.

"Technically speaking," he began, and I spared him a glare.

"Don't you fucking start," I warned him. "Not when I'm looking at what appears to be a *hanged skeleton*."

The five of us were standing in a village, which would have had me rather curious if it weren't currently abandoned and on fire. Once you'd seen one burning village you'd seen all of them, really. Still, worrying as it was that we'd been in the Serenity

for nearly a quarter hour now and the only sign of life we'd seen was an empty village set ablaze, I was rather more concerned by the other thing we'd found. There was a nice old oak in the middle of town, one I was looking at, and someone had seen fit to tie a noose to the tallest branch and hang a skeleton from it.

"Perhaps it committed a crime," Masego suggested.

"She, by the looks of those hips," the Concocter noted from my left.

I narrowed my eye, poking the skeleton with the tip of my staff. She rattled a little, but remained defiantly not undead.

"You told me the dead always rise in the Serenity," I called out to Ranger.

It was one of the many ways the Hidden Horror had turned the Hell into his personal fiefdom, Hye Su had explained. The afterlife here was service in Keter's armies, marching through the gate into Creation. Not all souls remained in the Dead King's grasp, but many did. It was his most regular source of Binds, the ensouled undead used as officers for his armies.

"They should," she replied. "Something must have happened."

"She *used* to be undead," Hierophant said. "It's why the bones are still holding together, the necromancy fused them."

"But she wasn't destroyed," the Silver Huntress grunted. "There's nothing broken enough to break the spell."

Which was the part that actually worried me, I mused. Any idiot could hang a skeleton, particularly if it wasn't moving at the time. When you did it and it appeared to *work*, though, that was a different story. Something eldritch was afoot and this was a bad place to face it. The Hells were not the same as Creation, rules were not as firm here. And when you were powerful enough they could even be changed: how else would even a powerful mage like Dead King have been able to rule a Hell for so long? Which meant that somewhere in the Serenity an entity was loose that was capable of bending those rules. Possibly even when Neshamah was fighting them, which was a mite unsettling. Who or what would be able to fight the Dead King like this in his own private kingdom? Considering this place didn't look like it'd been burning for more than an hour, we might just be close enough to learn the answer to that.

Joy.

"We're not going to learn more from this place," I finally said. "Fire's burnt through too much. Ranger, have you figured out where we are?"

"About an hour south of the nine-hundredth stele," she replied. "We crossed through further west than we should have."

She paused, glancing at Masego.

"Wekesa would not have made that mistake."

"If only he were still with us," Masego agreed. "If only you had helped make it so in any way."

Ranger's face tightened. She was not, I suspected, used to being spoken to like that even when she loosed her little barbs – not from people she didn't consider equals. Only Hierophant had not lied or insulted her in any way, for all the tacit contempt behind his words, so she was struggling to find a reason to be offended. She wasn't used to dealing with Zeze at all, I thought. Not the way Sabah and Scribe had been. She'd not stayed with the Calamities long enough to be. Much as I would have enjoyed continuing to listen at Ranger continuing to fail at winning a battle Masego was unaware he was fighting, the sight around us was making it clear we needed to get a move on.

There were things going on in the Serenity I'd not anticipated, so I was in need of answers.

"So which is the closest gate?" I asked.

While there was only one Hellgate in Keter, it was not a simple tunnel through. The Dead King had, over millennia, tied the portal to several gates spread across the Serenity. Though the other end in Creation could only be tied to one Serenity gate at a time, there were at least nine of these spread across the Hell that Ranger knew of.

"It's the Writhing Palace," Ranger said. "The Banquet Hall is a lot less defended but it's at least an hour more: there's woods and a river in the way."

*Fuck.* I'd heard that name once before, when I came to Keter for the talks, and thought it was not somewhere I ever wanted to visit. I should have known better than to tempt the Gods that way, I brooded.

"I don't suppose anybody's got a drink?" I glumly said. "I'm going to need one if we're going to a place called the godddamn *Writhing Palace*."

"I do, actually," the Concocter surprised, going rifling through her haversack.

She got out a small crystal flask with something that looked like water in it, though after she handed it to me when I took out the

cork the smell of strong liquor assaulted my nostrils. I took a pull and almost choked, eyes watering.

"Is that moonshine?" I croaked out.

"It is," Cocky proudly smiled. "I made it myself."

I took another pull from the flask, having gotten used to the strong taste.

"You're a delight," I told her, "and now my favourite person in this band of five."

Ranger took a step closer, reaching for the flask, but I moved it away from her hand.

"We ask," I chided, "before we take."

"No," the Concocter immediately said, smiling beatifically.

When I turned to have a look at Ranger's face, though it wasn't irritation I found. She looked like she'd been slapped in the face, I thought, or perhaps had seen a ghost. And it was on me that her eyes rested, not her former pupil. She withdrew as if burned, striding ahead of us.

"Come on," Hye Su gruffly said. "Let's get this over with."

I corked the flask again, handing it back to Cocky with a murmur of thanks, and settled into a thoughtful frown. If it was a ghost she'd been looking for, well, there was only the one we shared.

And I wasn't quite sure how I felt about Ranger seeing my father in me.

—

Deep down part of me had expected something about the Serenity to be fantastical and disturbing, but by all indications the Hell was one of the single most boring places to ever exist.

It was all fields and forests, with occasional river or dirt road passing through. I barely saw any animals, but there had to be a few around else the people here wouldn't be able to clothe themselves. In a way, it was the pinnacle of the Dead King's achievements that his personal Hell was something so violently unremarkable. It was a land without dangers or excitements, a seemingly endless sprawl of pretty little villages without fear or famine. And it was *only* villages. Not a town to be seen, much less a city, and the two villages we'd passed through had shown only a few different trades. The Serenity had been carefully crafted to remain forever pleasant and stagnant, not a soul from it ever interested in leaving.

If we'd had more time, I would have studied this place with fascination. What had it taken for Neshamah to turn a Hell full of devils into this pastoral dream? How had he shaped his people into being so utterly content, growing and pruning them over centuries as an immortal gardener would a tree? Though horror lurked behind what the Dead King had done here, I itched to learn the methods. There'd never been a ruler like Neshamah before, not really, and likely there never would again. That was something to be fervently sought, but when he passed the Dead King would take with him a unique mind. One that had learned secrets deeps and strange, for all its malevolence.

The boredom ceased about the moment we found the first corpse by the road.

"Those bones have been exposed to the elements for decades," Masego said. "This used to be undead."

And now the skeleton by the dirt path was, by all appearances, laid to rest. Once more without a mark on it to explain how that had come to be. *Even Light would leave traces*, I thought. *Did something dispel the necromancy keeping it moving?*

"It's too close to the road for it to have been coincidence," the Silver Huntress said.

"Agreed," I grunted. "Whatever's responsible for it collapsing was going up the road."

Which Ranger had said led to the Writhing Palace. The entity responsible for this would likely beat us to the place, which while simplifying getting to the bottom of this was just a bit unsettling. We still had no idea what had caused any of this or why. We kept going up the road, finding at first another few lone corpses and then soon entire companies of them. All prone, all without marks.

"Someone was sending troops after whoever walked up that road," I frowned.

And it'd been more than one person doing that, as it turned out.

"There's tracks all over the fields," Ranger told me. "At least a hundred people heading towards the palace, not all at the same time."

"Ominous," I noted.

We hurried, for lack of anything else to do, and followed the path at a pace just short of a run. I found it more difficult to tell time here – the Serenity had no true dawn or dusk I could measure myself against – but it could not have been an hour by the time it began. It was a pulse I felt. Steady like a

heartbeat, rippling through the air like a drum. It battered away at all of us, and though goddesses riding my mind for years had hardened me I was not the only one here. Masego and Ranger seemed more irritated than truly affected, but the other two were looking dazed.

"Shit," I muttered.

"Warden?" Ranger asked.

"I've felt this before," I said. "I know who it is."

"Who?" Alexis said, tone disbelieving.

"The Hierarch," I told them. "Though his aspect didn't reach quite this far last time I encountered it."

In Rochelant I'd need to reach the plaza where he was before it was this strong. Now we couldn't even see him yet and it was like a tide in the air. That was a small thing, though, compared to the revelation that Anaxares the Diplomat was for some fucking godforsaken reason *in the Serenity*. How? Last I'd heard he should have been wrestling the Choir of Judgement, and stubborn as the madman was I didn't see him winning that tussle. He hadn't at the start, and unlike him the angels could not tire. How could he have- no, that didn't matter. Not really. The particular method was irrelevant in the greater scheme of things. What mattered was why *he* was here.

We were too late in the game for it to be an accident.

"I had thought him imprisoned by the Choir of Judgement for his blasphemy," the Silver Huntress slowly said.

"More like imprisoning with," the Concocter replied, sounding amused, "but you're not wrong."

"How kind of you to say so," Alexis acidly said.

"It's an interesting trick," Ranger mused. "Something like projecting an abstract kind of domain, if I had to guess. It'll be tiresome to deal with inside a place like the Serenity."

I tuned them out, closing my eye and forcing myself to think. An obvious answer was there to the second question I'd asked myself, but I forced myself to consider others. And yet as I went through one possibility after another, discarding the impossible and the unlikely, I found that only one remained standing. The Intercessor had done this. She'd done it because she had a use for the Hierarch's presence here, even though I could not be sure what it was yet. It had to be the Wandering Bard, because it wasn't anyone on my side that'd done this and there was no one

left that could screw with angels and wasn't aside from Yara of Nowhere.

What was the play here? Obviously Hierarch was poison to a place like the Serenity, so it might be the Intercessor was trying to poison the Dead King's bolthole should he lose on Creation. On the other hand, in one of the conversations I'd had with her she had pretty convincingly sold me on the Dead King being stuck in the Serenity as him being defeated. 'Sealed Evil in a box' wasn't a story that ended well for the Evil in question in the long term, she'd not been lying about that. She could have been lying in a broader sense, sure, but that was a rabbit hole not worth going down.

If the Intercessor meant to cut off the Dead King's retreat and believed there was nothing he could do against such a stroke, then she could have done this years ago. She hadn't. Which meant she was after something else. Aside from cutting his retreat, what was she- oh. Oh, fuck.

"It's actually that simple, isn't it?" I murmured, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

There was nothing aside from cutting off the Dead King's retreat, because that was the whole fucking point. She was making sure Neshamah knew that if he didn't win in Creation, he was done. No way out, no path of retreat. The Intercessor wanted us to be fighting against a cornered animal with nothing left to lose. Someone capable of *anything* so long as it bought him even a heartbeat more of survival.

"Catherine?" Masego asked. "You're talking to yourself again. Are we still headed to the Writhing Palace?"

I grimaced. It was the closest gate, and I needed to get a finger on the pulse on what the Hierarch was after. Occasionally violent madman the Bellerophon might be, he wasn't necessarily an enemy. Not unless his remarkably even pissing match with the Seraphim had changed him too much.

"We are," I answered. "Prepare your minds, it'll get worse the more we approach."

At least, I mused, I finally knew what had happened to the undead we'd been finding. Necromancy keeping soldiers fighting in a war that hadn't been voted on in the service of a tyrant? The Hierarch would see that as so furiously intolerable they'd drop down the moment they entered his aspect's reach.

And so for once, I smiled, someone had popped up that was scarier for the Dead King than me.



The Writhing Palace was a ruin.

I could see the bones of what it had been meant to be, a boast as to the power of the man who'd made it. Curved pillars of ivory rose like rib bones from the grass, their shadows cutting across the green. Their shape drew the eye, outlining the belly of a great beast ending in a head that was a now-shattered throne room. No single stone was left unbroken, as if someone had wanted to take a hammer to the very principle of royalty, and among the ruin someone had started a fire. Anaxares the Diplomat, a too-thin man in tattered beggar's robes, roasted a slab of meat over an open flame in the wreckage of the Dead King's throne room. He used a snapped gold scepter as a spike and sat on the shattered back of the throne, his burning grey eyes wreathed in smoke.

He looked like the death of crowns, feasting over their demise.

Yet what gave us pause when we approached was not the sight of him but instead what lay around. The Writhing Palace had not had walls of stone, Ranger had told me. It was a boast, after all. Between the ribs and the throne room of pure white marble, it had been a great palace made entirely of devils. Thousands and thousands of them, of all shapes and sizes, each interlocked and forever writhing as they remained frozen in place by the unbroken will of Trismegistus King. Or so it had been. Now the Hierarch had come, the Republic's howling anger made into a man, and the spell had broken. The devils had broken into courts, some huddling around fires and others assembling into mobs as other stood above them and gave speeches in the dark tongue.

Some of them, I gathered from a closer look, were attempting to organize elections.

The others pulled closer to me as we approached, save for Ranger – whose pride lay in indifference. There were humans in the throng, I eventually saw. There were so few of them compared to the devils that I had not noticed. They sat with the Hell's first inhabitants, speaking animatedly as they shared fires. No mobs were howling for blood, but I knew why already: we'd walked past a forest turned into gallows as we approached, humans and devils swinging from branches. The anger of the people had been sated, at least for now. I could feel the song of the Hierarch's madness turned into an aspect, the low and deep thrum that slithered down your veins. It would wake again in time, hungry for further ropes and necks.

None sat with the Hierarch or stood in our way as we approached him. We got a few curious looks from devils, those that had eyes anyhow, but our presence seemed of little interest to the throng. We weren't even worth curiosity. As I limped over broken marble, the light of the fire flickering ahead of me, I paused to glance at the rest.

"I'll handle him," I said.

Ranger and the Huntress both looked as if they wanted to argue, but I turned my back before they could. Neither dared to cross me by following anyway. I slipped past the shattered throne, fingers trailing what had once been beautiful white marble and was now jagged remains, and reached the fire's warmth. The Hierarch's eyes rose to me, the man looking neither surprised nor unsurprised. Should I wait for his invitation I would still be standing come Last Dusk, so I found a jutting shard of the broken dais and sat, staff leaning against my shoulder as I warmed my hands against the fire. The Hierarch's madness battered away at my mind like a tide. Rolling in, rolling out.

"Catherine Foundling," Anaxares the Diplomat greeted me.

He did not name me a queen. I had not expected him to.

"Hierarch," I replied. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Tyranny Knows No Borders, For They Are False Inventions," the Hierarch informed me. "May Any Who Would Constrain The People Be Devoured By Bees."

"That'd take a lot of bees," I noted.

Those had mouths, I figured. Probably. It seemed like the kind of thing they would have, though I had never made a deep study of the creatures.

"Or a lot of time," the Bellerophan thinly smiled, "and it comes easier than bees."

I snorted, feeling his aspect filling the air. With every breath I felt as if I were drinking it in, the heady brew of revolt and rebellion. The thrown torch and the howl, the snap of broken chains and the flinch of the tyrant. There was a reason I'd never quite managed to hate the Hierarch, for all that he was ruin on near all he touched. Some part of me had never been convinced he was *wrong*.

"Yet we never seem to have enough of it," I shrugged.

I glanced at the slab of meat he was over-roasting. Sheep, by the looks of it.

"You going to share?" I asked.

"Are you yet a tyrant?" he replied.

"I'll abdicate before the year is out," I informed him. "Or die."

"Either is an acceptable outcome," the Hierarch conceded.

And yet he did not, I could not help but notice, offer me a piece. *Republicans*, I amusedly thought. I was still wearing a crown, after all. Why would he offer me anything at all?

"Thought you'd still be having words with Judgement," I idly said. "Are you done with the Seraphim?"

He frowned.

"They have escaped their sentencing for now," the Hierarch told me. "The peddler leant a hand."

My eye narrowed.

"The Wandering Bard," I said.

He shrugged.

"It has many names, all but one a lie," the Hierarch said. "I care not for the masks it wears – all that's left true is the duty."

"To keep the Game of the Gods going," I frowned.

"To keep the animals in the cage," Anaxares said, baring his teeth. "To rattle the cage when we get rowdy, until we remember how to kneel."

"She's doing a lot more than that, these days," I told him. "There's a war outside, Hierarch. One the League is fighting in, even your Republic. I don't know what it is she wants, but it's not for us to win again Keter."

"There's only one war, Catherine Foundling," the Bellerophan replied. "The lash and the back. Everything else is noise."

I leaned forward, smoke licking at my face.

"And which is she?"

"A queen's question," Anaxares the Diplomat scorned. "You think those wielding the lash are freer because they deal out the suffering. That's the trap, Catherine Foundling. The promise that you get to hold the whip instead of feel it, that there is no fairness but you can be on the *right* side of the unfair."

Grey eyes met mine, unblinking.

"But it's slavery too, to spend your live lashing backs," the Hierarch said. "Just a different kind, and you can't escape it any more than they can."

My fingers clenched, the unclenched. What would it be like, I wondered, to be the Intercessor for a hundred years? To never be

quite for Above or Below, to always be sent to put your finger on the scale whenever a great Good or a great Evil was to be born. I forced myself to think of that, and then turn a hundred years into a thousand. Two, three, ten. What would it do to someone, to hold that Role? When I'd been young, barely the Squire, I had fought in the ranks at the Battle of Three Hills. I'd gone through Helikean mercenaries that day as if I were a sickle reaping wheat, until the killing didn't even feel like killing anymore. It had just been motion, a limbs moving to accomplish a chore. So what would it be like, to lash backs for ten thousand years?

*It wouldn't be anything anymore, I thought. Not a lash, not backs, not people or pain. All that would be left was motion and the tiredness of the hand.*

Still warming my hands by the fire, I shivered. A long silence stretched out, the Bellerophan disinclined to break it.

"That war outside," I said, "they could use you. You're still Hierarch of the Free Cities, they haven't tried to take it. You could go to them."

And if he did, his mere presence would tip the war. It wouldn't be as powerful on Creation as in here, his aspect, but oh it would still be something to be feared. Bones dropping dead for the second time, Binds revolting against the chains. And Revenants I could only guess, but it was the kind of guessing that brought a wolfish smile to my face.

"I did not choose it," Anaxares the Diplomat said.

"*They* chose you," I retorted.

Elected, even. That was something even he was bound to respect.

"I thought that, one," the Hierarch faintly smiled. "That I had been forced into the prison, that I was forced to hold the lash even if fought never to wield it."

"But?"

"It is only a word," Anaxares the Diplomat softly said. "In the end, for all that men call it a title and a Name it is only a word."

Gold dripping into the grass, the thin man took the broken scepter out of the flame and the slab of lamb with it, blowing on the roasted meat before he took a bite out of it. The juicy fat streamed down his chin in rivulets as he chewed, swallowing and only then offering me a hard smile.

"They can call me Hierarch all they want," he said, "but I will make of it what I want, and that path does not lead back to the League of Free Cities."

I leaned back from the fire, the warmth on my hands having turned scalding.

"So where *does* it lead you?" I asked.

He laughed in my face.

"There is only one war, Catherine Foundling," Anaxares the Diplomat said. "And I will fight it wherever it is to be found. Here, there, everywhere."

He leaned in, the grey smoke the very same shade as his eyes. As if he were it, or it him.

*"We are all of us free, or none. I will suffer no compromise in this."*

And I Saw it, in that moment, what he was to become. Like a trail of fire, a spirit of fury and revolt that would bloom where chains were tightened until men choked. He would walk and ashes would follow in his wake, but tyrants would fall and even Choirs would flinch in the face of the Hierarch's indignation. A madman to the end, until a death as bloody as it was inevitable found him. There was, I thought, a terrible kind of beauty to it. To burning yourself at the stake of your own ideals. It was not something I could admire, not truly, but perhaps it was something I could respect. I reached for my staff and rose slowly, leaning against it.

"Good luck, Hierarch," I told him, and found I meant it.

There was nothing pleasant about a fire sweeping through a forest, but sometimes it was necessary nonetheless.

"All tyrants," the Hierarch told me, "have their day of reckoning. Even you."

I smiled.

"But not today," I said.

"But not today," he agreed.

It was as much of goodbye as I'd get from him, so I left it at that.

—

For all the unsettling sight that the Writhing Palace had turned into, leaving it proved almost laughably easy. The gate was

unattended, a circle of stone left untouched amidst the ivory pillars, and we barely got any looks thrown our way when Masego woke it up. With no one contesting our connection to the other end in Creation, it was only a matter of stepping through.

And just like that, I stood in the Hall of the Dead.

The same great hall where the Dead King had hosted me for meals and talks when we negotiated before the beginning of our war. There was no sight of the elaborate decorations of that day in the great hall, every part of it having been stripped bare. It was no longer a throne room now, instead serving as a gateway and nothing else for all that in many ways it was the heart of the Dead King's power. Once we had all crossed and the five of us stood alone in the cavernous hall, the Hellgate quieted and Hierophant's eyes turned to it.

"Will it work?" I asked.

"Father proved that it could," Masego replied.

We couldn't close the Hellgate. Only an angel's fury could do that, the *tabula rasa* effect undoing the cut in Creation that was a Greater Breach, but there were other ways. Akua had once opened a Greater Breach in the heartlands of Callow, and it wasn't an angel that'd fixed the mess. It had been the Warlock, who had redirected the gate from the inside: instead of leading from a Hell to Creation, he had warped it so instead it would lead from a Hell to another Hell. When I'd asked of Hierophant a way to cut the Dead King off from the Serenity, he'd offered me a solution based on the same principles as his father's work.

We all gave him a wide breath as he began to cast, beginning with words but quickly slipping into the traced runes of High Arcana. Even Ranger looked spellbound as she watched him work. See, as best as I understood it Wekesa the Warlock had been able to pull some truly ridiculous shit because he had an aspect that allowed him to sift through the Hells to find whatever he might need. It was the kind of trick that would allow a mage to, say, link two Hells by sorcery without the use of an artefact. Masego did not have that. What did have, though, was the convergence of three things.

First he had spent about a year of his life ruling over a severed shard of Arcadia made into a pocket realm. Second, he had Witnessed the Grey Pilgrim miraculously bring down a star on Hainaut in a way that defied Creational laws about how distance worked. And third, this very day he had brought us into the Serenity from a broken place at the junctions of Creation, the shattered Twilight Ways and the Hells. So as Masego's voice rose, speaking words in the mage tongue, he proved one more to be one of the greatest mages of the age by threading all three of those things together.

The Hellgate into the Serenity still led there. The Dead King himself had added a step to the crossing by linking it to several exit gates, though, and Hierophant modified that step. Instead of a simple nothing, the step was made into a place: the very same nothing we had used to cross into the Serenity. Which also happened to be an endless void, unless you'd made something to stand on. Which you couldn't in the moment before crossing the gate and being in that void. It was a dead end which wasn't technically a dead end, a nasty trick played on one of the Hidden Horror's greatest works.

And by the satisfied on Masego's smile as he finished the last syllable of the spell, this was just the beginning of him getting even with the Dead King.

—

The spire would be where it all ended.

We'd returned to Creation through the gate in the Hall of the Dead, itself built out of the crypts beneath the towering structure, but it would not be in that throne room we'd find him. Besides, we'd not actually gone through Serenity to take a swing at Neshamah: that was what the crown and the sword were for. Leading a band of five like mine against the Hidden Horror wasn't going to accomplish anything except corpses — which wouldn't even have the decency to stay still for long. I had set rather more practical aims for our little venture, deciding instead to go for a different sort of prize.

This entire spire was, after all, the Dead King's last redoubt. Out there in the inner city, armies and Named would be fighting desperately through streets and palaces to reach this place and deliver the knockout blow to the armies of the dead. Only it wasn't going to be that easy, because we weren't really going to win the battle for Keter. I had no doubt in my mind that troops and Named would reach the black spire, but the battle itself? We weren't even trying to win it, not really. All our offensives had been about getting enough people at the end of the line that we could destroy the Hidden Horror and end this war. In other words, our defeat was certain if the battle went for long enough. It was, in the end, simple mathematics.

We had neither the numbers nor the strength to really pull out a win in Keter. It was always going to be about Neshamah himself. Which he knew, of course, and would have prepared for. From his perspective, all he needed to do to win was survive until everyone else was dead. Which meant the black spire was going to be an unbreachable den of horrors, the kind of pit of despair that even Named despaired in the face of, but that wasn't even the first hurdle to actually getting to Neshamah.

That would be the wards.

The Dead King had fuck all to win by actually fighting us, after all. Sure, an old monster like him would scythe through Named and men like they were wheat but why take the risk that one of those lucky kids would have that one aspect that'd ruin his day? He was only hours away from winning, but since I'd returned Below's stories that was one of the single most dangerous places for a villain to be. So his first move wasn't going to be bringing down the sky on our heads or twisting time so we all died of fever as babies or sending out a demon riding on another demon's shoulders. It was going to be the most comprehensive set of wards that Creation had ever seen, fired up at their strongest and closed so tight not even a fly could sneak through.

If he could, Neshamah would stay behind a kingdom's worth of closed gates and magical barriers until there wasn't a living soul left in Keter. That was the kind of villain the Dead King was, when you cut off all the dross and the pageantry: most terrifyingly practical coward in the history of Calernia.

Now, while we couldn't sure that throwing enough heroes at these wards would result in way through it was actually a pretty decent bet. No matter how clever Neshamah was, Creation would nudge things so that the fight for the existence of Calernia didn't end with increasingly desperate knocks on a closed door. The price, though, would be *atrocious*. Names worked on weight, I had learned over the years, and sometimes that was a double-edged sword. Almost every Named on the continent was united in fighting the Dead King, which while a powerful story also meant that by fate's unspoken rules the Dead King had equal weight to a continent's worth of Named.

Overcoming that kind of opponent's foolproof defence just wouldn't be done without massive casualties, no matter how heavily providence put its finger to the scale. And the hard truth was that we just couldn't afford that many deaths when there were sure to be even harsher defences waiting further inside. That meant we needed another way to get those wards down, and that was where my little band came in. We had a way in through the back, and instead of using it on a futile swing at Neshamah's neck I had decided to spend our surprise on letting *everyone else* into the spire. We were going to destroy those ward anchors to collapse them, preferably in a way that didn't end up blowing us up.

Our plan had had admittedly been somewhat more complicated by the fact that none of us, not even Ranger, had any idea where those ward anchors were. Thankfully, there was a solution for that: wait long enough that the Dead King would be firing up that magic as strongly as he could to keep the pests out of his house. That wouldn't help any for most people, but we weren't most people. I had brought Hierophant along and he still had one glass eye that, while most famous for the light of the Summer sun still shining



in it, would be of use because of the artefact it'd come from instead: a pair of spectacles that could see magic.

We didn't need to know where the Dead King's war anchors were because Masego would just follow the flow of magic back to them.

"Down," Hierophant told me.

"We're already in the crypts," I told him. "There's nothing beneath this."

He met my eye squarely.

"Down," Hierophant firmly repeated.

I sighed and conceded with a nod. That was going to be fun. Unlike the last time I'd come to the Hall of the Dead its antechamber wasn't filled with an honour guard of Revenants, which were most probably out there killing people instead. Grim as the thought was, I was still thankful that we didn't need to fight every step out of the way after leaving the throne room.

"I don't care how good of a mage the Dead King was," I said, "war anchors need upkeep and replacement. If they're under us then there's bound to be a way to get to them."

It wasn't like Neshamah was going to do that kind of drudgework himself, so there was bound to be an access for whatever undead and Revenants ended up tasked with it.

"It'll go faster if we split to look around," Ranger said.

"It's certainly a faster way to get at least one of us killed," I affably agreed. "Counter-argument: Concocter, I know you've gone ruin raiding in the Brocelian at least once. Do you have something to find secret passages?"

"I do," she warily agreed, "but only the one bottle."

"Then Masego will need to get us as close to above those anchors as he can," I said. "It's our best shot."

Hierophant nodded absent-mindedly, looking through a wall as he did. He began walking away without a word but we didn't get far. I'd been pleasantly surprised that the Hall of the Dead and its antechamber had been deserted, but it looked like there'd been a reason for that: the entrance to the antechamber was sealed. The great bronze gates were so heavily enchanted I could feel the weight of the magic in the air.

"I can break the enchantments keeping the gates closed," Hierophant told me, "but they are tied to what appears to be an alarm ward."

"Of course they are," I muttered.

The Silver Huntress cleared her throat, eyeing Masego with that same kindly wonder all of the Refuge kids other than Indrani seemed to treat him with.

"The wall besides it," she said. "Is it also tied into the wards?"

"Not entirely," Hierophant replied after a heartbeat. "It is a grid pattern."

I hummed, realizing what Alexis was getting at and throwing her an approving look.

"Is a square in the grid large enough for a person to crawl through?" I asked.

"With some care, yes," Masego nodded. "It needed to be so that with the other magics did not saturate the stone."

The wall was stone and had other wards laid in it, but none that'd trip the alarm should they be punched through. The Silver Huntress handled the first layers by shooting Light into the square that Hierophant traced, breaking the protective enchantments, and the Concocter carefully rid us of the stone itself with careful use of an acid whose ever drop seemed to eat through inches of rock. It wasn't exactly dignified, but as soon as Cocky gave us the go-ahead we wriggled through the hole like worms and dropped unceremoniously on the other side. The hallway was empty but torches were lit there, which Masego revealed to be a trap the moment he had a look at them.

"Living flesh in the light they cast will turn the flames blue and feed into another enchantment," he told me.

Which was unfortunate, considering that pretty much the entire corridor was covered by their light. *And rubies to piglets the moment one of those turns blue a trap is triggered.*

"I can Wrest the magic, but we will have to stay together," Zeze added.

I nodded and we awkwardly clumped together to walk through the corridor so we'd stay in the light of a single torch at a time: Hierophant could only use his aspect on a single source of power at a time. There weren't any more torches in either of the corridors the spread out in a fork from here, but there were patrols of undead. Ranger had heard them coming, her hearing being ridiculously sharp even by Named standards.

"This deep there will be no Bones, only Binds," Hye Su said. "And he likes to use lesser Revenants as captains."

"We destroy even one of them and he'll know we're here instantly," I grimaced. "He's not the kind to get arrogant and think his fortress is unbreachable – he'll be actively looking for the rats that snuck past his walls, not denying they exist."

"Most illusions do not work on the dead," Hierophant said. "They do not see in a conventional sense."

"But you could fool patrols," I pressed.

He'd hidden us from the sight of undead before.

"I cannot answer as to Revenants, but certainly lesser dead," he conceded.

"Then we try that," I ordered.

And when it inevitably went wrong, hopefully we'd have enough of a head start that we got to bring down the wards before we had to fight our way out. Sometimes I wished my silver linings didn't all have streaks of blood on them, but arguably I was a few grisly murders past the right to complain about that. We ventured deeper into the enemy's belly, pressing against the wall as patrols passed by us on the way to the unseen place Masego was leading us to. It ended up being a locked and heavily warded room about a quarter hour away from the Hall of the Dead, its door hidden by an illusion that made it look like the wall continued. I chewed my lip and eyed the apparent patch of stone.

"Magic lock, you said?"

"Enchanted," Masego specified. "Almost every part of that door and wall are connected to the alarm wards. There are few secondary wards so the density is much higher than the antechamber's walls."

"So no crawling through this time," Ranger said, sounding amused.

I cocked my head to the side.

"A door's a door," I said, "but what about the floor?"

"Grid again," Zeze told me.

"So we make a tunnel," I said. "Go under the gate. Concocter, would you have enough acid?"

"No, but it is not difficult to make," she noted. "I have the means, though the variant will let out foul-smelling smoke."

Undead didn't usually have a sense of smell, so that wasn't a deal breaker.

"We try," I decided.

All things considered, it went well. We had to pick a spot near the wall to begin going through, since otherwise a patrol might walk into the hole even if it was veiled with an illusion, but aside from a tense moment when a dozen undead walked past us and a Revenant in armour lingered we got off fine. Ranger went in through, both because she volunteered and I wouldn't be all that sorry if she died. I was third, behind the Silver Huntress, and once I finished crawling out of the tight tunnel with aching shoulders I found I was standing in a bare stone room. Cocky came after me and a glance was enough to signify now was her time to shine.

She produced a bottle of what looked like golden powder, she emptied in the air – where it hovered! -before blowing on it. Fascinatingly, the powder dispersed on all sides. It whirled about the room like a scintillating storm before it began to gather in a handful of places. Streaks in the air followed what looked like air currents coming out of the hole we'd dug, which I supposed made sense since the room was otherwise sealed airtight. They also clustered on the ground, though, tracing footsteps leading to the right corner of the room but stopping shy of the corner itself. I grinned even as Masego dragged himself out of the tunnel, moaning all the while.

That'd teach him to be so damn tall, I haughtily thought.

"Looks like a hidden mechanism," I said. "Ranger?"

"I'll find it," she replied with indifferent certainty.

In her honour, after only some moving around she did. There was a faint, oily click and a stone at the junction of the walls dipped into the ground. Gears spun out of sight, the stone floor moving to open a pit going below and an iron ladder going into the dark.

"Catherine," Hierophant said.

"No, you can't stay up here," I absent-mindedly replied. "Alexis, down the hole first?"

"Shit space to use a spear, but I have a knife," the Silver Huntress conceded.

"*Catherine*," Masego repeated.

I turned to him irritated.

"What?"

"The lines of sorcery don't go deep enough below for this to be the war anchors," he said.

I froze. Wait, if this wasn't the place for the ward anchors then... The air suddenly thickened and the door leading out of the

room burned around the edges. The hinges, I realized, were fusing with stone.

"Water," Ranger announced. "Water's coming up."

And above us small holes opened in the ceiling, the air shifting as what I guessed to be an invisible gas began to be released into the room. *Of course*, I grimly thought. *Of course the fucking Dead King had made a fake ward anchor room to specifically trick people who could see magic.* He'd had literal millennia to indulge every spark of paranoia that ever occurred to him.

"We need to get the Hells out of here," I growled. "Concocter out first. Yell if you see undead."

I saw from the corner of my eye that Ranger was just holding her breath, apparently unmoved at the idea of no longer having to breathe, while Masego was weaving a spell around his nose. I did the same with Night, the Silver Huntress instead pulling up cloth from under her armour. I was to be the last out, so I had a look at the trap pit and got hit with a blast of foul odour. *Gods*, I thought with a small degree of awe. What a prick the Dead King was: not only was this trap meant to drown us in a sealed room if the poison gas didn't get us first, but to add insult to injury the ancient fucker was using sewage water. It was a degree of assholishness that verged into elegance.

Ranger followed the Concocter through, the Huntress next in line, and I stood by Masego as he stared through the wall with his flesh eye closed.

"I think I've found the path to the real anchor," he murmured. "I thought it was a bleed array, but it does seem to be headed downwards in small lines. There would have to be reservoirs elsewhere in the array structure that I have not seen, but..."

"I trust you," I frankly said. "Where?"

"Close to the Hall of the Dead," Masego said. "In between the fork of corridors were first found."

I got the distinct sense that I was just now being let in on a bad joke that the Dead King had been laughing alone at for a few thousand years, which was the best sign we were on the right track I'd had all day.

"Then we double back," I said.

It wasn't that easy. I crawled out ahead of the sewage and the poison, but it was to the sight of butchered corpses strewn all over the corridor. Ranger and the Huntress had seen to the patrol handily, but we were most definitely caught. This whole thing was about to head downhill in a hurry.

"Good news," I said, "we think we know the real path to the anchors."

"Bad news?" Ranger probed.

It wasn't her first band of five.

"It's back near the Hellgate," I said.

"Which will be swarming with undead by now," the Silver Huntress grimly said.

"Look on the bright side," I said.

"Which is?" the Concocter asked.

A moment of awkward silence passed.

"I was," I admitted, "hoping one of you would have something."

—

I let loose a blast of Night that hit the ranks of the skeletons like a trebuchet stone, crushing armour and sending bones flying. Within a heartbeat the corridor was filled up again, the sea of undead pushing forward. They were packed so tight they were actually getting in each other's way, but for all that apparent stupidity I knew full well that if they ever managed to close the distance we were in a world of trouble. It'd be like standing in front of the whole in a dam.

"Zeze?" I called out. "Tell me you're getting somewhere."

I could hear Ranger and the Huntress covering the other corridor, the once-Calamity rather enjoying herself by the sounds of it. I'd yet to see her feel threatened since the beginning of our jaunt into Keter, as if at no point she had believed she was in a mess she could not fight her way out of. Considering she'd broken into the Crown of the Dead alone several times, I wasn't even sure she was wrong.

"It is a frustrating puzzle," Masego admitted. "The solution keeps changing."

I grit my teeth and let loose another blast of Night only to find that a Revenant with a shield took the brunt of the blow. Eye narrowing, I drowned the hallway in black flame. That ought to buy me a but of time.

"So brute force it," I shouted. "Don't play the game."

"We've tried, Warden," the Concocter shouted back. "It started to melt the lock."

I was really starting to hate this place. I had before, of course, but only in a general principle kind of way. Now it was starting to get personal. I sent a blast of Night through the guttering flames, hitting blindly at the enemy, and risked a few step backs. Masego and Cocky were staring at rows of burning runes that had appeared on stone, a series of which needed to be picked to open the hidden door. What I knew about High Arcana – which this clearly was – would fill just about a parchment, if you wrote small enough, so I didn't try to tell Masego how to mage. Instead I told him how to be a thug, a subject in which my expertise knew few rivals.

It was a natural talent, humility compelled me to admit.

"We don't care about the lock," I said, "we care about the door. We'll melt the whole fucking thing if you have to. Cocky, use every drop of acid you have left. Or can make."

It wasn't like we'd ever need it more than now. I was forced to go blow up the corridor again as they got to it, but before long there were noises of triumph from the Concocter – and a sigh from Masego, who probably figured he could have beat the lock given long enough – and I retreated that way, calling for the other two to do the same. What was revealed was a set of stairs sloping downwards, large enough only for one person to pass at a time. Naturally, I put Ranger in front. Our method to get in there paid off rather quickly, as within moments of the five of us beginning to make our way down there was a grind of stone against stone as the broken door behind us tried to close and the walls began to suck out the air.

It didn't do anything, since we'd blow open a hole behind us, but if this place had been sealed up it would have been lethal.

I'd figured the way down would not be long but I was wrong. After a rather straight way down at first, the stairs turned into a downwards spiral. The Silver Huntress, who held our rearguard, began to loose arrows at the pursuing undead which thankfully were as limited as us by the narrowness of the stairs. Tension would have made it hard to tell how long we made our way down if not for the gift of the Sisters which told me the distance from dawn and dusk and allowed me to tell it was about half an hour. When we reached the bottom of the stairs in a pitch black room Masego tossed up a ball of light, revealing we stood in an antechamber.

Every surface was covered by tiles of bronze that each bore a glyph, sorcery pulsing thick in the air. *Yeah*, I thought, *this is the right place*. Gates stood in our way to the room beyond but Masego seemed in a good mood.

"The anchors are on the other side," he told me. "Not all of them, but the most important ones."

"And if we break them it'll bring down the defensive wards?" I pressed.

"The most power-intensive ones," Hierophant noted. "Others will remain. I will admit that Trismegistus' defences were made with a thorough eye for redundancy."

It would have to be good enough. I left the Silver Huntress to handle the stairs and keep the dead off our backs, helping Masego to smash our way through the gates. The time for subtlety was past. Though the Dead King's defensive wards were impressive and apparently the gates had recently been changed to resist Night, they had a weakness: parts of them relied on active sorcery, and that could be compromised by Wrest. Sweat beaded the back of my neck by the time we were done, but after another quarter hour of exertions the half-melted bronze gates fell down and revealed the greater room beyond.

It was, I immediately thought, like looking at the heart of a Praes flying fortress.

Stones and gems were replaced instead by engraved steles of black stone of different heights that formed a complicated arcane pattern, but the sight of bare stone walls covered in glyphs was most familiar. I should not have been surprised: Trismegistan sorcery came from the works of the very man whose work this was. There was a pool of what might have looked like water at the heart of the room, whose high arched ceilings crackled with shivering power, but there was a luminous sheen to it that betrayed it was no such thing.

"Pure magic," Hierophant breathed, looking at it too. "I have no notion as to how it was made physically stable."

"That's fine, since we need the opposite," I bluntly said. "Wreck this place, Masego. In a way that won't kill us."

"It will take some time," he said, and sounded almost reluctant.

I supposed to someone who loved sorcery as much as he did this was much like a lover of horses butchering a herd of Liessen purebreds. Still, he nodded and I left him to it. He'd call for me if he had a need of Night. Instead I wandered about the room carefully, wary of hidden defences, and found that while Concocter stuck close to Masego I was not alone in my explorations. Ranger was doing the same, circling the broadly circular room from the other way. The dome above us ended in a thin well leading upwards, but that wasn't what drew my eye or hers. There was another set of stairs on the other side of the room.

"Shit," I muttered. "That can't be good. Ranger, with me."



I called out to Masego that we were headed down, getting only a half-hearted wave in answer, and went down into the dark. These stairs were not like the ones we'd taken down: they were much broader, and the corridor they fed into had almost as high a ceiling as the ward anchor room. Ranger, whose eyes lingered on the ceiling, frowned.

"Something scraped against those," she said. "Metal or bone, I can't tell."

My stomach clenched. That ceiling was taller than most Gigantes. The stairs we took curved smoothly and led towards a room that was beneath the one holding the anchors. There were no gates leading into it, only a tall arch of stone, and when we crossed the threshold with wary steps it was to the sight of a gentle slope going down. Like a hill of bare stone the room slid downwards into what looked like a massive cavern, most of which was taken up by an equally massive well. I couldn't tell how deep it went from where we stood, but as the two of us slid down the slope my eye found something else to stare at. There were two shapes seated on each side of the wall, sitting cross-legged, and both wore an armour of painted ceramic tiles in purple and silver.

They were also massive, each large as a tower, and through the open faces of their helmets I saw no flesh: only leering skulls, with green flame burning where there should be eyes. Neither of them reacted to our approach, still staring down in the well.

"Those aren't Gigantes," I quietly said. "They're too large."

For the first time today, I saw Ranger tense.

"Titans," Hye Su murmured. "These are the corpses of Titans."

And yet they hadn't been fighting all this time, I thought. We'd seen no sign of them throughout the siege, when even the animated remains of such entities were sure to wield fearsome power. And, most worryingly of all, even as we left the slope and approached the well they did not so much as twitch. They just kept looking down into the depths, unmoving, and the closer we got the more I felt the eldrith power permeating the room. It wasn't anything as simple as magic either. I was not sure Masego's eye would be able to see it.

We were but a dozen steps away from the rim of the well when one of the dead Titans moved. Only its head twitched, turning towards me, and it offered a leering grin.

"Mistake," the Dead King said in Ashkaran.

A strong sensation of release washed over me, the dead Titans releasing whatever it was they had been holding, and from the

depths of the well there was a deep breath followed by a deafening roar. It would have burst my ears, if I'd not reached for Night in time. All I could think of in that heady moment before all the Hells come loose would begin chasing me was of a conversation I'd once had with a man now dead. The ghost the two living people in this pit had in common. *When you assault the stronghold of a villain*, Amadeus of the Green Stretch had said, *there are three things to watch out for: the monster, the trial and the pivot.*

By the looks of it, we'd just found the first of the three.

## Chapter 65: Monster

*"When it passed that King Angelika of Rhenia was slain on the Hocheben Heights by the Prince of Bones, the Dead King sent an envoy to return her sword to the heir Prince Emil. 'But it is only a loan, prince,' the envoy told him, 'for in time she will come to retrieve it.'"*

*– Extract from 'Crowned In Iron', a compendium of Lycaonese histories assembled by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis*

Ears ringing, I watched as great claws of bone – each tall as a man – caught the edge of the well. The creature within, a hulking shape wreathed in shadows that my hundred eyes could not pierce, began to drag itself out of the pit even as the sitting Titans rose to their feet. Above our heads the ceiling of the cavern began to crack, the beast's roar having been enough to shatter the stone.

Well, I mused, this had all taken an unfortunate turn.

"Say, Ranger," I muttered. "I don't suppose you'd happen to know what that thing is?"

"Pray I do not, Warden," Hye Su quietly replied.

In other circumstances that undead had been made of not one but two Titans would have been the main source of my alarm, but because this was Keter the fact that I saw them moving from the corner of my eye ranked only rising concern. Outright alarm was reserved for the thing emerging from the well, claws gouging the stone as if it were mud. The sharp lengths of bones led into what I thought to be tendrils of some sort, until I realized they were large chords of sinew. They wove themselves into long, squirming limbs as the behemoth rose from the pit, revealing to my eye a head twisted draconic head that flowed into a mane-like length of sinews going down its neck.

Its eyes were as a mass of burning coals hidden beneath the writhing tendons, burning in the light yet casting no shadow.

"That felt like a yes," I noted. "So what am I looking at? Because I've seen dragons, and I'm no draconologist but I'm willing to *firmly* state this isn't one."

"This is one of the drakoi, the ancient foes of the Gigantes," Ranger grimly said. "They are to dragons what we are to insects."

That was less than promising, I mentally noted. Even a glory hound monster-fighting lunatic like Hye Su didn't sound eager to fight one of those creatures, a sure sign they were nothing to trifle with. This was, after all, the same woman who'd picked a fight with a Queen of Summer in her own territory. On the other hand, even if apparently Neshamah had decided that now was as good a moment to start throwing dead gods – and how I missed the days where I didn't have to deal with even the singular of that, much less the plural – at his problems I could tell with a look that this was a necromantic construct.

It was made of bone and tendons, and though some sort of eldritch power coursed through it like veins it was most definitely dead. Which meant someone had already killed this thing once already, that it wasn't impossible. Just *almost* impossible, and that was the kind of wiggle room I'd been betting my life on for years now.

Mind you, I'd died a few times.

"Time for a tactical withdrawal," I decided.

"Agreed," Ranger said.

As one we turned clean pairs of heels to the enemy, though of course it wasn't that easy. The drakon hit the ceiling as it rose to what I was pretty sure wasn't even its full height, the cracks from earlier widening and stones began to fall. Wasn't as much of a problem as the two dead Titans having gotten a move on, though. The power that screamed against the air was sorcery, but like none I'd ever felt before. Where other spells felt like they stole the reins from Creation, imposed a will on it, this was... It felt barbed, cutting, like it hurt all around it just by existing. Whatever the Hells it was, it sunk into the slope of stone we were running up and seized it whole. A heartbeat later the rock turned liquid, Ranger cursing as she leapt and I pulled on Night.

I wove tendrils around me and hooked them at the ceiling, forced to further crack it and dangerously vulnerable as I made sure I wouldn't be swept by the tide the stone had turned into. Ranger went about it another way. She had a sword in hand, and with a grunt of effort she cut at the liquid. Wind billowed as the

strength of the cut opened a path through the liquid stone and she landed on dry ground. Reluctantly impressed, I took half a heartbeat to appreciate how quickly she'd managed that before my attention moved back behind us. Where the drakon was halfway out of the well and filling the cavern with its hulking, writhing shape but also something... subtler. The air in the cavern felt different now.

Tainted somehow.

The second Titan had just finished their spell, a sphere of burning sunlight forming in front of them, and I wasn't even going to try to protect that – I wasn't sure what it was, exactly, but there was enough power wafting from it that the air was warping. And since the bloody ceiling was falling anyway... I exerted my will, the tendrils of Night hooked into the stone above me spreading like roots before I seized the chord holding me up with my hand and *pulled*. The ceiling came down behind me, tons of rock falling like rain as Ranger cut her way through the tide again.

I landed with a pained grunt from the ache in my bad leg, brushing off liquid stone from the edge of my cloak before following Ranger into her race out of the room.

I didn't look back but I still felt sizzling winds blowing at my back and a horrid keening sound as stone was vaporized, discarding hopes this had so much as scuffed one of the monsters. Getting out of the cavern alive would have to be enough. Ranger got onto the stairs first, her stride swift without looking hurried, and I was but a dozen steps behind. I risked a glance back as I turned the corner and felt a swell of dread when I saw that the drakon was digging through the broken ceiling. Going straight up towards the room with the ward anchors. Fuck. All the more reason to hurry, but that moment of dallying had cost me.

The wall I'd ducked behind was ripped off by an unseen hand, the power of the dead Titans screaming in my ears, and I threw myself to the ground just a little too slow – three rays of sunlight had shot out like burning lances, and the third caught my shoulder. It went through the Mantle of Woe where so many magics had failed, melting part of my pauldron into worthless slag. I cursed and pulled on Night to cool the molten metal before it got to my flesh, crawling out of the way even as the wall that'd been ripped out was thrown back in pieces. Right at me. I was pulling on Night even as a small voice in the back of my mind reminded that staying still was death, that the next rays of light would kill me, but what else could I do? The stones would kill me just the same. Only a hand grabbed me by the collar and Ranger dragged me up, just in time for me to toss a veil of darkness over us as we ran. A wave of pure sunlight incinerated where we had been standing a heartbeat earlier, but we'd gotten out in time.

We legged it up the stairs, back to the ward room, and I calmed my breath even as I felt the floor shake beneath our feet. Cracks were spreading all over, enchanted tiles breaking like mud left out too long in the sun. Puffs of magic came out with every break, filling the air with aimless power.

"Thanks," I got out.

"Might still need you," Ranger frankly replied.

Fair enough, I conceded. The Concocter had left the floor and headed to the bottom of the stairs and the Huntress was still fighting up those, by the sounds of it. Masego was still among the garden of steles, though now he was kneeling by the pool of pure magic at the heart of it all.

"Hierophant, end it," I shouted. "We need to *go*."

"Nearly there," Masego faintly replied, his flesh eye closed.

I hurried across the cracking floor, feeling massive claws scrape at it from beneath.

"How long?" I asked.

"Would you worry," Hierophant said, "have anything to do with the half dead god beneath our feet?"

My jaw clenched.

"*Half* dead?" I repeated.

"The body is a necromantic construct," Hierophant said, "but the entity itself is not. It seems to be a piece of godhead contained in an undead body."

So that was how he'd done it. Powerful as the Dead King was, the Riddle-Maker had made it pretty clear that at his peak the Titans could have wiped the floor with him and his buddies had supposedly been slapped around by the drakoi. Grave robbing Titans and raising their bones I could buy, but controlling the remains of an elder dragon had been harder to swallow. Only he hadn't done that, by the sounds of it. He'd poured god's blood into a corpse he'd made sure he could control and still found the resulting monster hard enough to control it'd been kept sealed in a well beneath Keter.

"It's a drakon," I told him.

Masego's eye flew open. He stared at me for a heartbeat.

"I will hurry," he conceded, as if doing me some great favour.

"I hope you will, because there's dead Titans not far behind us," I grunted.

I left Ranger to keep an eye on the stairs behind us, instead going to the set that'd lead us back above. I told Cocky to run up and tell the Silver Huntress so start clearing our way out, because we needed to get the Hells out of here in a hurry. I still had a knife up my sleeve, one that might bite deep here, but I'd rather keep it back a little longer. If we could get the drakon to rampage around the spire after the wards came down, it'd draw Named like flies. By the time I returned Ranger had her bow out and an arrow nocked, eyes on the threshold of the stairs, and Masego had gone still kneeling besides a stele.

"Hierophant?"

He did not answer, not for a few heartbeats. Then he took his hand off the stele and rose to his feet, smiling. I could already feel the wards fading in the distance. Names that had felt a world away were now at the tip of my fingers. There were, I grimly thought, less of those left than I'd thought. The Dead King was having himself a massacre. Zeze cleared his throat.

"I believe that-"

Ranger loosed an arrow, but I didn't even end up looking at what because the floor *broke*. A writhing, gaping maw tore through the stone and closed its fangs around steles and the pool of magic.

"Run," I hissed.

No one argued. The fucking collapsing floor should have held up the Titans but instead a path made itself out of falling stone as we ran for the stairs – Cocky, showing wisdom, was already gone – and the two giants began to cross unhurriedly as the drakon continued guzzling up the room. *It's eating too much*, I thought. Even steles that hadn't been disappeared between the great jaws. Was the Dead King's leash truly so loose or was there another reason for this? Ranger went in first, taller than me and in better shape than Hierophant, and my effort to slow down the enemy by tossing a spear of blackflame the way of the Titans died without making a dent.

Sunlight blazed in the Titan's hand and suddenly the Night flames were just *gone*.

That one, I grimly thought, wasn't a good match up for me at all. I'd have to pass him on to someone else. We hurried up the cramped, narrow stairs even as they shattered behind us – the Titans were opening a path for themselves – and I found that the Silver Huntress had delivered on the task I'd given her: she was already at the very entrance, holding back the tireless horde with a short spear wreathed in Light. Behind us stone was

shattering like glass, but we'd make it in time. The Dead King's monsters were large and the same protections he'd built to keep people out were now serving to keep his abominations in.

"Hierophant," I said, "can you help with the dead?"

"I can-"

Masego kept talking, but I did not hear the words. My blood turned to ice, for the herald of misfortune had made itself known: someone was tuning a lute. I did not see her, was not certain it was my ears I was hearing her through, but I recognized the sounds. Drunken fingers tuning the Intercessor's lute with surprising deftness, plucking at it until every string was just right.

"-rine, Catherine," Hierophant called out, sounding irritated. "Are you listening?"

"Can you hear that?" I asked.

My eye turned to Ranger when I found no trace of understanding on Masego's face, and she slowly nodded.

"Music," Hye Su said. "Faint, but I hear it."

Faint? No, that made sense. Ranger was an old and powerful Named on top of the more exotic talents that came with being of elven blood, but it was me who'd effectively ripped out two chunks of the Bard's aspect and then eaten them. I'd be able to hear her better than anyone else alive.

"The Intercessor's taking an interest," I said, "and that's never good. Let's get the fuck out of here."

We swept out of the stairs like a whirlwind, Masego dropping half a hundred undead with a spell that went after the one animating them while Ranger and the Silver Huntress charged into the opening. We went down the right corridor, opposite of the one we'd taken last time, since it was the way out of the crypts. The ranks of the dead were thick and reinforcements pouring in like a flood but the momentum was on our side. I let loose blast of black flame to keep the enemy off our back, sometimes, but in truth my mind was barely on the fight. I'd left an eye of Night behind to check on the progress of the Titans and the drakon but nothing came out of the stairs, which I realized with a grimaced made sense.

Instead of having the giants and the fucking horror dragon wreck these too-small corridors pursuing us, they were probably going to keep heading straight up to catch us in one of the large rooms above. I tried to remember as much as I could of the layout from the time I'd come here to negotiate, since I'd seen a little of

the spire when I had, but I just couldn't seem to fucking concentrate. Not when the idle tuning had turned into strumming, and then into the beginning of a slow and sad song. The Bard usually pretended to be a poor musician, for she liked to play the fool, but she hadn't that night in Ater and it seemed she would not today either.

My head wasn't in the fight but it hardly mattered: the Dead King hardly threw anything worth a second look our way. Masses of lesser undead and a few Revenants barely worth a second look. With Ranger as our vanguard, it was the equivalent of throwing wheat at a sickle. We smashed our way through the corridors, leaving only broken bodies behind us as we hurried out of the crypts. I vaguely remembered the path from the last time, which served us well enough as we fought our way to the bottom of a set of wide stairs. As the Huntress took off the head of the last Bind there, I glanced back at the receding tide of undead behind us. I threw a few clumps of black flame to make sure we wouldn't be followed, but in truth they didn't look eager to.

Not a good sign, I admitted to myself as we went up.

Last time I'd been here, I'd thought it was a beautiful place. The hall was a dome of arches, grey stone rising to support a gallery above, yet the most striking part of it was the ceiling. It was curved, held up by elegant beams of stone, but everything in between was coloured glass. The pieces shone from the light of a sun that did not truly exist, painting stretches of colour on the tiled grey floor. The five of us stumbled out of the side hall panting, all of us scuffed but none wounded, but there would be no relief: just as I'd predicted, the enemy had arrived ahead of us. The hall's floor had been ripped open, crushed tiles flying everywhere like feathers falling, and out of the deeps the drakon had come.

It was waiting for us, nesting among the broken stone. A forest of sinewy tendrils sprouting from its back had been folded over the spine like wings and a thick, long tail was curving against the crushed statue of some ancient conqueror. The coal-like eyes did not turn towards us, but the weight of the creature's attention was as a weight on our shoulders – the Concocter buckled and would have fallen to her knees if not for Alexis catching her arm. My eye narrowed as I took in the shape of it. It felt larger than before, I thought. And more... defined. As if it had somehow grown. More than that, the same subtle power I had felt tainting the air below was back.

It felt humid, like it was pressing against your skin in the most disgusting of ways. Like a droplet of water going down your spine, only deep down you knew it was an insect. The drakon was doing something to its surroundings, I thought. Not even going out of its way to do it: existing was enough. And though I



couldn't quite tell what it was doing yet, I doubted it would be anything we'd enjoy. I cracked my neck, leaning on my staff, and breathed out.

"Well," I said, "it looks like we'll be having that fight after all. Hierophant?"

"Catherine?"

"Cast," I said. "We'll buy you as long as we can."

He opened his mouth to answer but unfortunately it seemed that this was as much leeway as the ancient horror was willing to allow us. It began rising on its feet, body writing and sprouting smaller half-aborted limbs before as it did. It swallowed most of them back up into its body, but not all.

"Move," I hissed, Ranger drawing her sword as I did.

The Concocter stuck with Masego, since in a fight like this she was near useless, but the rest of us spread out. The Silver Huntress shot towards the stairs that'd lead up to the gallery, a good shooting nest, and Ranger unhurriedly stepped into the open grounds of the hall. As for me, I breathed out and pulled deep on the Night. Sve Noc answered with unstinting hand, coolness raging through my veins and overflowing. It raced down my body, weaving shadow through the Mantle of Woe as I pulled down the hood. I breathed out mist, fingers closing around my staff of dead yew, and let the shadows wreath me whole.

Unsheathing my sword, I stepped into the fight.

The Ranger, huntress of gods and monster, was the first to strike. She moved like a ghost across the broken floor, disturbing not so much as a mote of dust, but the drakon struck just as swiftly. It batted away at her, and when she leapt above the blow snapped forward to swallow her whole – only for the Ranger to carve through its head instead, blowing through the tendrils of sinew like a great wind. There were no bones or brains inside, I realized as Ranger's strike revealed nothing at all. No head to take, and the drakon seemed indifferent to a blow that would have killed most creatures of Creation. It did not even pause in its assault, wings fluttering as it tried to slap down Ranger.

Too slow, for I wove a tendril of shadow to drag her out of the way and the Silver Huntress loosed an arrow of Light from the upper gallery that burned halfway through the limb. Dropping Ranger when she was two dozen feet above the ground – she landed in a smooth crouch – I went on the offensive. Probing its defences, I tossed a few balls of blackflame at its sides. Half were blown out by the wings as the drakon turned towards me, but a few landed and I frowned as I looked through eyes of Night at

the results. The black flames were 'burning' without actually consuming anything, and soon guttered out without having done much of anything.

That disgusting humid sensation grew stronger, pressing at me from all sides.

Did it get stronger against power it had been attacked with? I couldn't tell from just this and didn't have the time to spare for another try: I'd drawn the creature's attention. It moved like the wind, crossing the floor in moments and disdaining the use of claws for its gaping maw. Teeth formed out of bone as the writhing nothing opened, looming above me, and I released the Night I had gathered around myself. Three other Catherine Foundlings legged it in different directions as I backed away under cover of a veil, but the abomination ignored the illusions. *Fuck*, I eloquently thought as I reached for my sword.

Instead the side of the drakon's head was split open by a sword blow, the Ranger attacking from the side even as the Huntress loosed a Light arrow into the head from the other side. They'd not just struck to save my ass, though – I could see from the angle that Alexis had placed her arrow after Ranger struck in an attempt to burn out part of the drakon's head. I backed away behind the pillars as the writhing, hollowed head withdrew, jaws snapping at nothing, and saw that a handful of cut-through sinew tendrils had dropped down on the stone. Like the other two I kept an eye on the drakon as I moved, grimacing as I saw that the head was full again in moments.

There would be no shaving away at the monster piece by piece, then. Back to regular violence. Hiding in the shade of the pillars I began to weave a curse, wondering if those might not work better than outright destruction, when I saw someone dash out into the open grounds. The Concocter, I realized as I swore and loosed my curse early. The lash of Night hit the drakon's side, and to my pleasant surprise did exactly what I'd wanted it to: writhing tendrils went still, locked into place. *The Dead King*, I realized even as the Silver Huntress peppered the drakon's limbs with arrows so it would not splatter Cocky over the ground. *The Dead King's work is the weak point.*

The shard of divinity that gave consciousness to this monster wasn't something I could snuff out without preparations, but it was stuck in the contained Neshamah had made for it. And *that* I could affect. The Concocter ran back in cover, though not before I got a look at what she'd been doing: she'd cut out a piece of sinew and shoved it into a bottle. Huh. Whether or not that'd end up useful, the Huntress had caught the drakoi's attention with that last volley: it roared, forcing a wince out of me as panes of painted glass shattered above us. The colourful shards weren't

just falling, though. As if moved by an invisible hand, they gathered into a ring of hovering glyphs.

I watched, open-mouthed, as the same wards that Hierophant had killed below came back to life around the drakon.

So that was why it'd eaten so many of the ward anchors, I realized. It didn't just get stronger against things that had attacked it, it got strong from what it ate. Which was, if I understood correctly the disgusting humid feeling still pressing tight around the Night veiling me, anything around it for long enough. The longer we fought the drakon, the harder it would be for us to harm it. Given long enough, even the strongest workings of Night would barely rate a scratch. It was an absurd thing to contemplate, something like that. Invisibility in the making, if used by even a halfway clever soul. *Which is why the Dead King used only a shard of you, imprisoned in a body he controls.* Neshamah would keep it stupid enough it wouldn't be able to break free of its binding, and even then it was a fucking nightmare to deal with.

We couldn't beat this thing, I admitted to myself. Not right now, not with the tools at hand. And stubbornly continuing to fight it would make it harder to put down when we *did* have the right people there. *We need to retreat the moment Masego lands his spell*, I thought, looking through an eye at Hierophant. He was still murmuring, one eye closed and the other burning. The Concocter was close by, hidden behind a pillar as she rifled through her bags for something and stared at the piece of the drakon she'd snatched. There was no telling when he'd be done incanting, I thought, but it had to be soon. Best I prepare for it.

As the drakon began to methodically ravage the upper gallery, tearing through it with a cat's cruel laziness, I stepped out in the open and levelled my staff at the abomination.

"We're going to retreat," I called out, "the moment the spell is done."

That was when it all went wrong. Was it intelligent enough to understand words? I'd not thought so, but immediately the drakon stopped trying to flush out the Huntress and instead turned towards where Masego still stood. I swore and shaped a pair of curses before tossing them at the creature. The first was a mixed bag, the sinewy tendrils I'd meant to knot up instead melding together and reforming, but the second was an outright loss: the limb I'd meant to freeze was barely slowed. It was adapting to Night tricks. I broke into a run even as the drakon slithered towards Hierophant.

"Cover," I screamed. "Cover him, Merciless Gods!"

The Huntress leapt off the edge of the gallery, spear lighting up like a falling star as she cleaved through the drakon's wing, but a leg burst out of the abomination's side and caught her in the belly. The sound of metal crumpling was heard and she went flying. I cursed again, drawing on my Name to quicken my stride. My leg was throbbing but I grit my teeth and let the pain pass through, getting there about the same time as Ranger did. The Concocter popped out to throw a vial of some liquid that turned to flame on impact but the drakon hardly noticed, smashing the pillar she'd been hiding behind and breaking her arm. As well as revealing Masego.

I stood between death and Hierophant, screaming as I called on Night with my sword raised, and Ranger's blade cut through the beast's neck – though it formed back anew past the cut. I unleashed torrents of black flame into the drakon's face, aiming for those buried red eyes, and though I calcinated tendrils I could feel the resistance growing ever stronger until suddenly sorcery bloomed behind me. Through the Night I saw Hierophant's eye open and his lips mouth a single word.

"Rot."

The drakon shuddered, maw opening, and began to *scream*. The dead flesh it was made of began to decay and come apart in clumps, and though the abomination grew them back it was writhing in pain as the rot refused to leave its body. Masego slumped, half falling to his knees, and I sheathed my sword to hold him up. The drakon was distracted for now, so we needed to get the Hells out. Only we couldn't, not quickly. The Concocter was trying to get up, cradling her broken bones, and the Huntress was still on the other side of the hall. There were cracks on the pillar where she'd landed and she was splayed below, either dead or unconscious. I'd need Ranger to-

I found Hye Su already looking at me, face a blank mask, and my stomach clenched. She'd been looking at the same things I did, and had come to the same conclusions. Only she wasn't me, so the decision that followed was different.

"It is a battle lost," Ranger said, shaking her head. "Survive if you can: I am still owed."

And without another word, she turned her back on us. She was going to leave, to get out while the spell held. I had to push down the urge to set her on fire as she made to leave – it wouldn't help – and held up Masego as I saw the way the rot was slowing in the abomination's body. It was getting used to the spell, we didn't have long left.

"Get the Concocter out," I ordered Hierophant. "I'll pick up the Huntress."

Only the drakon roared again, and as I covered my ears the rotting parts of it were shed to the ground. Ember-red eyes turned towards us and my stomach clenched as I reached for the Night. I wouldn't be able to get everyone out. It struck and I-

"That's a *lot* more tentacles than anyone should be comfortable with."

And I felt my shoulder loosen as the limb that should have swept through all three of us was instead split in half, Indrani sliding down its length and landing on her feet. She took a few steps back, looking almost drunk, then spat to the side as the drakon put itself back together.

"You're late," I said.

Indrani snorted.

"Had to take the long way around," she replied. "Shiny Boots was already knocking at the front doors."

Another roar shook the hall, the drakon furious at the continued interruptions.

"I'll forgive you this time," I conceded.

She hummed, twirling her longknives thoughtfully.

"The Lady bailed on you, yeah?"

"Just about," I grunted back.

We'd bargained for her to lead us into Keter by the secret way, not fight by our side, so in truth she hadn't broken our agreement. But she'd abandoned us nonetheless.

"Isn't that something," Indrani murmured.

I could **See** it, through my dead eye. The way the weight shifted, the story moved. Two claims had been competing, and while one had been stronger than the other it was also not there – and the story still wanted a Role to be played.

"It was mine to have anyway," Indrani decided. "My friends to keep alive. My family to protect."

And with that last step in the journey, it all fell into place perfectly. The Ranger fought monsters, but the Ranger had fled and monsters were still being fought.

"If she throws away the fight, then it's mine to pick up," Indrani said. "So how does the line go again? Ah, yes."

She straightened, meeting the drakon's burning ember eyes.

"I am the Ranger," she said, and made it true. "I hunt those worth hunting. Tremble, for you qualify."

And in a blur of movement she was gone. I nudged Masego towards the Concocter – he could set the bone and heal it – and went to circle around the broken hall as Indrani fought toe to toe with a horror out of legend. She moved like the wind, never where the drakon struck as it tore through the hall in growing frustration. The Ranger carved through sinew and bone, shattered claws and laughed as the drakon roared its impotent wrath. Like a bull trying to swat a hornet, it missed again and again as she stung from every direction.

I reached the Silver Huntress and found to my relief that she was not dead. Unconscious and her skull had been rattled, but it took more than that to kill a Named. I dragged her back into consciousness and stopped the bleeding out of her forehead wound but her eyes were still unfocused as she got on her feet. To get her back fighting fit we'd need a priest, much as I hated to admit it. My eye went back to Indrani, who was impossibly holding her own against the abomination. *A Name's never stronger than when it comes into being*, I reminded myself.

I watched as she laughed and toyed with a dead god, knowing that it was beautiful but it could not last. That first burst of strength would fade, and when it did the situation would turn against us. We needed to get out while we still could, I thought as I guided Alexis across the room. Towards the same threshold that Hye Su had left through. As if to crown my worries, the drakon finally landed a blow on Indrani. She'd blocked it, so it snapped one of her blades instead of her bones. It still tossed her back, sliding along the ground until she stood near where Masego and Cocky had gotten to.

"Indrani," I shouted, "we need to leave. Move the fight elsewhere."

She didn't look happy, but she didn't argue. I could see how her Name was pulling at her to finish the fight, to pursue the moment it had coalesced through to the end, but she was a stubborn soul and she knew her limits. She'd fight off the influence. And now that she and Hye Su had played out their parts of the story that left only...

"I'll handle the rearguard," the Ranger shouted. "You go on-"

The drakon went still. A heartbeat later, its wings slid to the floor. I almost laughed at the absurdity of the sight.

"Go," I shouted back. "It's handled."

She spat angrily to the side, but did not refuse the order. She dragged Masego and Cocky along, heading for the door. I pushed on

the Silver Huntress as well, who while still dazed was still fast on her feet, and within moments I was the only human left in the hall. The drakon's gaze slowly swept the hall, coming to rest on me, and when the full weight of its attention solidified I had to let out a breath. My knees were shaking.

Then the drakon's head rolled on the floor.

It decated to nothing as another grew back, but now before the towering monster a lone silhouette stood. It was tall and thin, holding in its hand a sword of made of wood. The drakon reared up, roar filling the air, and then its head rolled on the floor again. And its limbs, and its tail. They sprouted back, the abomination's entire body writhing angrily, but it looked taken aback. As suddenly as a match lit nine of the Emerald Swords surrounded it in a loose ring, silent as the grave. The disgusting miasma in the air slid off them like water off a duck's back.

"It won't work," I croaked out. "You can't kill it for good with swords."

Then someone was standing next to me, the elf's eyes contemptuous.

"We are," they said, "the Emerald Swords."

It was said like a simple truth, like a sentence passed.

"If it cannot be slain for good," the elf told me, "then we will keep slaying it until the Last Dusk."

The words were said without so much as a speck of doubt. In the distance, the drakon's head and limbs dropped again.

"Leave, Warden," the elf said. "Our debt must be repaid."

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if perhaps the monster could be put down for good, but then I recognized that for the vanity it was. Wounded pride my plans had not been enough to stop the Dead King's own. So instead I inclined my head, as much in thanks as acknowledgement, and broke into a run to catch up with the others. Named were dying ahead of us, my own had told me. The fight to end all this awaited.

And as I passed the threshold, the Intercessor began to sing.

## Chapter 66: The Empty Grave

*"Needing a second blow to take a head is an unforgivable sin for two professions: butcher and king."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis II

It was a sad song that Yara of Nowhere sang us. Slow and meandering, like a stroll in a graveyard. The words should have been happy, but they dripped of grief.

*"O Tiferet, raised where the river sings*

*You of gardens merry and nights so bright."*

It was a fitting tune for the sight sprawled out beneath us, I thought. Our feet had devoured an empty hallway until we turned a corner and were faced with a decision: hurry on towards the gates or take a narrow set of stairs up into the galleries. We'd gone up, after brief hesitation, and now I hid in the shadows and leaned against the balustrade as I watched a battle unfold. The halls beyond the great one we'd escaped were lesser but numerous, a maze of roofless rooms overlooked by great galleries that hugged the ceiling – one of which I stood on. The small halls were fed into by the corridors leading to the spire's great gates, and as Named and soldiers spilled into the labyrinth I finally understood why the Dead King had made this place.

It was a slaughterhouse.

Every inch of it was trapped. I watched a company of bright-clothed fantassins blunder into a room whose sides were a pit trap covered by an illusion, gathering in the middle in time for holes to open in the walls and undead wedged inside them to begin unloading crossbows into the thick formation. Doors exploded, tar-covered floors were set aflame and swarms of poisonous insects poured out of hidden panels. I saw a doorknob turn into a leering devil that bit off the hand of the legionary that'd tried to open it, fangs crunching through steel, and even as she began screaming clouds of acid were blown into the room through small holes in the floor. All the while bows were fired into the labyrinth from the gallery above, arrows falling like rain. Death everywhere, and that wasn't even the worst of it.

I had wondered why so few Revenants had fought us when we fought our way out of the Hall of the Dead, and now I had my answer: they were here. Dozensof then, maybe as much as a hundred. They tore into the troops like wild animals, armoured battering rams and storms of sorcery that went through even heavy companies like butter. As the loud melees took place lighter Revenants, soft-footed and quiet, slunk atop the tall roofless walls and snatched the lives of officers to sow chaos in the ranks. Named fought them where they could – I glimpsed the Valiant Champion decapitating a tall Revenant in white plate and the Skinchanger ripping out a lich's throat – but the maze was working against them. It forced them to split up, take different paths and run into traps.

Meanwhile, the Revenants moved according to the orders of their all-seeing eye in the sky: the Dead King himself, wielding his



creations with fatal precision. He wasn't here, but then he didn't have to be. All it'd take was one Revenant up in the gallery to serve as his eyes.

*"The city that forever blooms in spring,*

*Beloved of singers and delight."*

"The Scourges are here," Indrani quietly said.

There was no sign of them, but she was right and we both knew it. The chord was there for me to pull on, and it was not slack but taut – tense, ready to snap. The Scourges would come out soon, and I knew exactly why it was that Neshamah was holding them back. His bloody work below told me the answer to that, with the way he was so carefully splitting up Named and trying to overwhelm them with lesser Revenants.

"He's trying to figure out what band of five he'll be facing," I agreed. "The moment he does, the full strength of the Scourge will fall on whoever he decides is the most important part of it."

It was what I'd do, in his place. Set up the meat grinder below us to kill off Named weak or not yet matured, throwing traps and disposables as he most powerful of our lot until he had a decent idea of what our strengths and weaknesses were. And then, when he'd figured out who was supposed to kill him, he'd break that band before it ever formed. It was his favoured tactic, always had been. He didn't want to face the Severance or the Crown before having broken the band behind them.

"No sight of Hanno or the Mirror Knight," I frowned, "but Akua shouldn't be far behind. We'll need to cover her and the Autumn Crown when they arrive."

Indrani shuffled and my stomach dropped. Ranger was not meeting my eye.

"What happened?" I said.

"It wasn't anybody's fault," she said. "We got ambushed."

No, I furiously thought. No, she could not possibly have fucked this up. I'd *trusted* her, trusted the both of them. I grabbed her by the scarf, pushing her back, and she only grimaced.

*"What happened?"* I coldly hissed.

"Catherine," Masego said from behind me.

His tone was a warning and I forced myself to heed it. I released Indrani, taking a step back and mastering my fury. It had yet to wane.

"The Seelie cut the crown in two," Ranger admitted.

It was like a punch in the stomach. I staggered back, eye closing as I struggled to find another angle. Another way out of this mess. If we had no way to deal with the Dead King except destruction, then he had nothing left to lose. No need to think in the long term. No reason to hold back whatever horrifying surprise I knew bone-deep he would have stored away to make the consequences of destroying him unthinkable. And now I knew for sure why the Intercessor had nudged the Hierarch into appearing in the Serenity. Neshamah's back was up against the wall, with no way to retreat.

It was do or die, for the Dead King, and he was the kind of person that'd kill all of Creation to earn a single breath more.

"What does she want?" I moaned out loud, fingers rubbing the bridge of my nose. "What can she possibly get from things going to shit for us? With Hierarch back the ealamal's back on Judgement, which is not *great* but shouldn't-"

"It is not," Hierophant interrupted me.

My eye flew open, meeting his own.

"Explain," I evenly said.

"I noticed when we crossed into the Serenity," he told me, "that the Choir of Judgement appears to have been silenced by the effort of freeing itself from the Hierarch."

My jaw tightened.

"So what the Hells does the ealamal do if Judgement doesn't guide it?" I ask. "Is it a dud?"

"It would express only inherent properties, like the tabula rasa effect," Hierophant said, "unless otherwise guided. Which-"

"- which the Bard can," I finished in a whisper, blood going cold.

So that was the game. Corner the Dead King so that he became the nastiest of animals, emptying his vault of all horrors on our armies, and then when it all went bad on us then Cordelia would fire up the ealamal and the Intercessor would get to decide what happened. What would it do, I wondered? Answers came to me by the dozens. She could rid herself of the Dead King and then kill everyone who knew about her, I thought, allowing herself to start building anew all the bridges she'd burned with our generation. Or she could kill all of us here, a warning as to what happened when she wasn't listened to. She could even make it do nothing at

all, let us die and try to win the war with the rest of Calernia on the back of that weight.

There were so many ways for her to get back in the game, to snatch back her crown, and yet all I could think of was the conversation I'd had over a fire in the ruins of a palace once proud. *But it's slavery too, to spend your live lashing backs,* the Hierarch had said, grey eyes burning. *Just a different kind, and you can't escape it any more than they can.* And so the thought occurred to me, perhaps the most terrifying of them all, that I should be asking myself a different question.

Was Yara of Nowhere still trying to win at all?

"It's not finished, Cat," Indrani stiffly told me. "Akua, she forged something out of the crown."

That earned back my full attention. It was on the tip of my tongue to dismiss the possibility, the absurdity that someone could just forge something out of a broken crown of the fae in the middle of battle, but it never passed my lips.

If anyone could, it was Akua Sahelian.

"What did she make?"

"Shackles," Ranger said. "The kind that bind power both ways."

A crude thing, I thought, made on the bedrock of Masego's work. Yet it was as much a miracle as Hierophant's labour that she had been able to do even this much. I studied Indrani closer, eye narrowing.

"There's more," I said, and it was not a question.

Indrani grimaced again.

"She didn't say it, but I'm sure it's not the kind of shackles you get to take off after they're put on," she told me.

I closed my eye. Of course they wouldn't. They'd been made from the Autumn Crown, which we'd not intended Neshamah to ever take off. Whoever held back the Dead King would never be relieved from that vigil. Yet someone would have to, before this was over, and that left a burning question: *who*. I had meant Akua to take up that role as queen over the Twilight Ways, when this all began, but the Ways were broken and now the Autumn Crown as well. Were we going to have to bet it all on the Severance? No, I decided, the shackles could work. They should be able to strip the Dead King of his mastery over undead, or close enough. We hadn't lost yet, it was just that instead of offering a gift that could not be refused we'd have to beat the Hidden Horror to shackle him.

And someone was going to have to be shackled to him.

"Fuck," I swore.

Should it be me? I wasn't sure that was feasible, not if it was to be the Warden and one of the rulers of Cardinal. I couldn't afford to be either gone or powerless. Who else, though? Akua might have served as the queen of a broken throne, but she'd made these shackles. I was not sure she could also wear them, that the story would flow. It would be a heroine's sacrifice, and though I was more than half in love with her she was not a heroine. Not even now.

"Warden."

Alexis' voice brought me out of my thoughts again, a reminder that all around us people were dying and I didn't have the time to spare to figure it all out in my head. The Silver Huntress was pointing something out for me over the balustrade and I leaned over to see. Fresh waves of warriors were entering the slaughterhouse, at their forefront warbands of heavily armoured orcs. At their head a towering man in scorched plate brandished a greatsword, the Warlord roaring as they entered the fray. Hakram had arrived.

"Appreciated," I told Alexis, "but he can take care of him-"

I caught sight of the killing arrow as it passed me, eyes widening as I reached for Night, but Indrani was faster. Her bow was already strung and her hands blurred as she moved, nocking and releasing her own arrow. It ended up being a close thing. I watched with a thumping heart, relieved for a moment when I saw Hakram had not been the one aimed at – only for the relief to fade when I realized soldiers of the Army of Callow had arrived with the fresh wave, and Vivienne was leading them. Ranger's arrow caught the Hawk's less than a foot away from Vivienne, the two of them hitting a legionary in the shoulder instead. She let out a shout of alarm and ducked, although too late.

The cold voice in the back of my mind, the part that wasn't frozen fear and rage at how close Princess had just come to dying, wondered why the Dead King would believe Vivienne Dartwick crucial to his defeat. Worth committing the Scourges for. I realized, in the heartbeat that followed, that she wasn't. But she was one of the Woe, and we'd come out swinging for her – taking out into the open people he was genuinely wary of. It was a simple and straightforward ploy, a kind villains had been using on their opponents for millennia. And they'd kept using it because it fucking *worked*, I grimly thought.

"Ranger," I said.

"Yeah, I've got the Hawk," Indrani said with deceptive mildness.

Were I a better woman I might have spared some pity for what lay ahead of the Scourge.

"Hierophant with me," I said, then turned to the remaining two. "As for you-"

"I want to get the piece of the drakon to the Witch of the Woods," Cocky interrupted me. "And I will need an escort for that."

I mulled that, then nodded.

"If you can't reach her," I said, "then find the Riddle-Maker."

Kreios would likely be better for the fight if we were aiming at a second round with the drakon, but the Witch was a lot more likely to be free. She should have been pounding at the front gate with Hanno, serving as a magical battering ram, and those should be open by now. Still, it had not escaped me I had found no trace of either those two. The battle there might not actually be won yet. *Later Catherine's problem*, I decided. She was plucky lass, she could handle it. I caught Masego's eye and waited for his nod, only then pushing through the butterflies in my belly to take a few steps back. I broke into a run and, using my staff, vaulted myself over the edge of the balustrade.

*"O Tiferet, home of my true love*

*A maiden fairer than the full moon."*

I gathered Night to me as I fell, Mantle of Woe flapping around me, and did not even turn when an arrow was shot at my back. Indrani would take care of it. I wrapped myself in shadows, swallowing whole the volley that fell on me from the galleries above, and wove tendrils below to catch my fall. They caught the edge of a wall, turning the drop into a smooth lowering atop the wall even as the labyrinth came alive around me. I watched, unimpressed, as the undead in that maze of rooms turned towards me as one. Komena laughed in my ear, delighted, and together we raised my hand as Night coalesced between my fingers.

"Take a swing," I challenged. "See where it gets you."

A storm answered. Arrows and javelin and spells, swarms of dead insects and clouds of poison. Ghouls scrambled up the wall and skeletons thrust long spears at my feet. It would not be enough. In my hand I held a sphere of darkness, and as I opened my palm it was revealed for a heartbeat – until I closed my fingers to crush it. The air shook, for a moment, and as I grinned the sphere exploded into a shower of black pinpricks. They flew out, growing and swelling into beams as they did. Komena's eyes told friend from foe where I could not, held back by the limitations of my flesh, and everything else turned to smoke.

Night sliced through stone and steel and dead, the rays of the dark sun I had shattered taking a remorseless bite out of Creation.

The storm died, swallowed whole save for broken remnants that did not even reach my feet, and I let out a misty breath as Night swam thick through my veins. Behind me Hierophant landed atop the wall, his descent wavering like a feather's. He had lowered his own weight to take the edge of the fall, but within moments it was restored and he stood at my back.

"An ugly place," Masego mildly said. "I do not like it."

"Then lighten up, Zeze," I smiled, "because the two of us are going to burn it down."

It was an elegant, intricate plan to kill Named and men that Neshamah had crafted here. So instead of trying to defeat him in kind, beat him at his own game, I was going to take a fucking hammer to his clever little schemes.

"You have a plan, then?" Hierophant asked.

He sounded, I thought with a smile, so utterly unconcerned by the sea of enemies around us. I pointed my staff behind us.

"See that?"

"I do," he drily replied.

"It's the furthest any of our allies have gotten," I said. "So anything past it goes."

"Simple," he praised.

"That's me," I humbly replied, then winced when I realized what I'd just said.

It was too much to hope the Dead King hadn't heard that, wasn't it? Goddamnit. Well, time to drown my embarrassment in a copious amount of fire.

"I'll defend," I said. "Attack."

"It is in your hands," Masego agreed.

In the heartbeat that followed translucent shields bloomed in a bubble around him, arrows pinging off the panels, and he began to speak in the mage tongue. He was out of it for now, so it was time for me to get to work. Now, we were surrounded by undead crawling over walls to come at us as arrows rained from above and Revenants converged on our very visible raised location. We were in hostile territory, which was why tactics dictated that my

first move should be to spread that disadvantage around. I loosened my wrist and rolled my shoulder.

"All right," I muttered. "Let's see if this time I can make it hot enough it goes straight to bone ash."

A javelin flew up, shot from the dead angle of my dead eye, but I followed the nudge of my Name and slapped it aside with my staff. Breathing out, I raised the staff of dead yew I had received in the depths of newborn Twilight and stirred the air with it. Slowly, carefully tracing the circle as Night gathered and the air began to heat. The Hawk came for me, but I had Ranger on my side. I didn't glance at the black arrow before hearing it shot out. And as strings of black flame began to linger in the air in the wake of my staff, I shaped my will. Below me a ghoul clawed its way up the wall, baring its fangs at my boots, and I bared my teeth back.

"*Run or burn,*" I hissed, slamming my staff down.

It did not, I saw, run quickly enough. Like a knot of snakes come loose, ribbons of blackflame erupted from where my staff had struck the top of the wall. They slithered in every direction, leaving behind burning trails as they ate through flesh and slid inside armour to devour the dead inside. I watched through a hundred eyes as the working spread out around me like a blooming flower, black flames consuming everything as they hungrily advanced. It would do, I decided. I'd not destroyed everything in that radius, as much because I was trying to avoid killing Grand Alliance forces as because some of the undead were hard to put down, but it was all on fire. It'd serve as a wall for most everything except Revenants.

"Abyss and firmament. I take the shape of the star and the depth of the pit, borrowing laws high and low."

"Oh dear," I muttered, glancing at Masego. "Is that really usable *inside*?"

It really was quite worrying how often I was the person in my inner circle that most responsibly handled unspeakable eldritch power. Although that was, I supposed, not unlike being the drunk with the smallest bottle. Still, now that I'd rid myself of the chaff it was about time for the real contenders to come out. The first one to pop his head out was a Revenant mage that rose in through a dignified levitation spell, his colourful embroidered robes fluttering in nonexistent wind as he pointed a gnarled staff my way and began an incantation that echoed across the ceiling. Frowning, I pointed a finger and gathered Night in a needle before it shot out. It blew through his skull as I began to look who that'd been a distraction *for*, finding that tricky little tart the Seelie climbing up the wall to get at Masego's back.

I tossed a ball of blackflame at her, breaking the illusion, and enjoyed the look on her face when the fire then circled around instead of dispersing and blew her off the wall before she could eviscerate Hierophant. Really, like I *wasn't* going to learn when she kept using the same trick? More worrying than the sneak, though, was the way that all the poison clouds across the maze were beginning to gather in a ball under the ceiling. That was the fucking Tumult at work, mark my words, because of course now that I'd set this place on fire and Masego was going to smite it what we needed was a fucking poison storm on top of everything. Much as I would have liked to get rid of that, though, I had more pressing matters at hand.

Like the Mantle turning the wall I was standing on to dust.

I cursed, stepping back as the tall Scourge swung her mace at my retreating form. The parts of the wall that hadn't crumbled cracked from the blow even as I tossed a curse at the Mantle's head, which she took head on. Her helm warped, but she pit her power against mine and while if it'd kept up she would have lost I didn't have the *time* – through a Night eye I saw the Seelie throwing a knife at Masego's head, hastily withdrawing my will from the Mantle to form streaks of darkness around Hierophant's shield. The knife wasn't where I'd seen it, but I went wide enough I caught it anyway. Only for, you know, the Mantle to finish turning the wall under me to dust. Fuck, I thought as I fell, and I raised my staff to try to slap aside the mace blow but it was going to be tricky and-

And three hundred pounds of orcish fury smashed into the Mantle, Hakram Deadhand snarling as he tackled her through a door so hard splinters went flying. I landed on my knees, leaning against my staff, and let out a sigh of relief. Reinforcements had arrived.

"I have woven curses into hymn, stuffed a heart with straw. That which is hollow I have raised onto the dais, revered as glorious under three skies and revered by nine corners."

I hadn't seen the Prince of Bones yet but he was bound to be close, so I couldn't leave Hakram alone for too long. I couldn't leave Masego alone for long either, though, because the fucking Seelie was around and he wasn't moving. She'd gotten past my armour like it wasn't there with that knife of hers, once, so I wouldn't bet on a spell shield doing better. I wove a tendril to get me back up on the chunk of the wall where he was standing, landing in front of him, but there was no sign of the enemy. I took a few limping steps forward, frowning, then thrust my staff down at the burning room: a gust of wind picked up ash and tossed it everywhere, but still the Seelie remained hidden. Where was she?

My Name nudged me and I heard the sound of steel ripping into flesh, turning to see a throwing knife stuck in the Seelie's



wrist as she flew on translucent red wings to stick Masego from the back. She shattered into pieces but almost immediately reappeared a foot below the broken illusion as another throwing knife thumped into her back, ripping her ballroom gown as she turned with an inhuman snarl. The Princess, sword in hand, flicked her other wrist and palmed a third throwing knife.

"The Varlet did it better," Vivienne Dartwick told her. "So what would that make you – a *quarter* rate Named?"

Ah, trash talk. That most hallowed of Callowan traditions.

"Can you cover Masego?" I called out.

"Run along, Black Queen," my successor smiled. "I'm finding stabbing fae to be satisfying in a very soulful sort of way."

And who was I to argue with that? The same tendrils that'd raised me up threw me in the direction Hakram had disappeared in, and as Indrani shot out an attempt of the Hawk's to kill Warlord I found the duelling Named and guided my descent very precisely: my boots landed on the back of the Mantle's head as she tried to wrestle Hakram's great sword out of his grasp, my staff following a moment later and sliding in the space between the helm and the plate.

"My turn with the curses," I grinned even as I unleashed Night.

It'd be hard to cook her from the inside, but I could do something simpler. No matter how much armour and steel there was in there, it was the bones that moved the Mantle. And affecting those was a lot easier than wrecking all that steel. Night sunk into them like poison, and even as the Scourge shook me off and sent me flying into a pile of stone I exerted a twist of will to get the working moving. A heartbeat later her limbs began shaking uncontrollably, and with a roar Warlord smashed her into the ground. He ripped his greatsword out of her grasp even as she twisted on the ground and I rose to my feet. His arm rose to deliver a crippling blow, but before he could the wall to his left burst open in a shower of shards as the Prince of Bones tore through.

"Shit," I hissed, and slid Night along the ground before the Prince.

I covered the stone with greasy, oily Night but to my unpleasant surprise it did nothing. The fucking Prince must have either enchanted boots or nails under the soles. Hakram took a greastword blow with his own, steel grinding on steel, and I realized with a start that the blades were almost identical. Had Hakram *stolen the Prince of Bones' sword* at some point? I loosed a burst of raw Night in the Mantle's belly as she tried to get up, knocking her back down, but that wouldn't last. This wasn't a

good place for us to fight, not with limited space and two enemies so heavily armoured.

"We pull back," I shouted.

"Agreed," Warlord growled, taking a step back.

Even as we began our retreat, though, the tide turned again.

"Behold," Hierophant called out, "all ye with eyes, for I have made a god of clay and it is an idol of WRATH."

I shielded my eyes from the cold, alien light just as it came down. The clamour of the battle went silent as a grave, as if Hierophant's miracle had killed noised itself. When I took my hand off my eye it was to the sight of both Scourges withdrawing, which after hesitation I allowed. After all, where they were headed I'd find it difficult to pursue: the latter half of the great room that I had pointed out to Masego was now a plain of red, glowing glass.

Nothing else was left.

The front half of the labyrinth, having come into Grand Alliance hands through hard fighting while Zeze and I made a spectacle, burst into cheers. The dead there were good as routed, and through our advance was stopped until the glass cooled it was now open grounds to the great stairs at the back of what had once been a maze. The surviving Revenants fled that way, ignoring spells and arrows, and when I glanced up at the ceiling where the poison clouds had been gathering I found with some amusement it had been glassed as well. The heat had dispersed whatever the Tumult was up to, sparing us a spot of trouble on top of all the rest.

*"Her smile gentler than the wings of doves,*

*Her laugh worth a thousand tunes!"*

And the Intercessor was still singing, great. Because that was always a good sign. I went shoulder to shoulder with Hakram as we returned – well, shoulder to arm anyways – and bumped my armour against his.

"You got there right in time," I said.

"One of my better habits," Warlord smirked.

"I suppose you do need something to make up for all the sleeping around."

As he spluttered my eye sought the source of the voice and found that Vivienne's face was cut, but it was just a shallow slice under her eye. Masego, following behind, was entirely unharmed

and looked to be in a rather fine mood. I supposed I'd be too, if I had gotten to blow up half the labyrinth of someone I despised.

"You're being pretty savage today," I told her. "It's been great."

"Well, it *is* the end of the world," Princess snorted.

"Speaking of that, Catherine," Hakram said, "there's trouble at the gates."

Wait, hadn't I figured something out for that? Shit, no I hadn't. Earlier Catherine had passed me the sharper because she couldn't be bothered to. *Earlier Catherine, what a bitch*, I uncharitably thought. She just kept screwing me over.

"Lay it on me," I sighed.

"The Titans are brawling," Vivienne bluntly said.

A small sentence that encompassing a large amount of collateral damage, I figured. Anyhow, the mystery of where the dead Titans had disappeared to appeared to be solved. Neshamah must have figured they were worth spending on keeping the Riddle-Maker out of his hair, and I couldn't fault the decision. The last of the living Titans would have been damned useful when facing down the Hidden Horror. We kept moving deeper into the maze, avoiding corpses and traps as we moved through the crowd of cheering soldiers.

"Is Kreios winning?" I asked with a grimace.

"No one can tell," Hakram admitted. "It was still going when we broke through."

"Broke through," I repeated with a frown. "Explain."

"We haven't won the battle for the inner city," Warlord continued. "The Procerans seized one of the avenues and we've been funneling troops into the spire through it, but the palaces are still in enemy hands and we keep losing the plaza."

Which was why it was such a haphazard mix of Grand Alliance troops that'd spilled into the maze. Whenever a push crested past enemy defences there was another wave of soldiers, but we didn't actually hold the great plaza. It made a rough sort of sense, I thought. It was where all the great avenues led to, so it would be the easiest place in all of Keter for Neshamah to reinforce.

"It has been some time since we crossed," Vivienne reminded me. "The battle could have tipped one way or another by now."

I slowly nodded.

"Do you know where Hanno and the Witch are?"

"Keeping the gates open," Warlord said.

And the enemy army off our backs, it went unsaid.

"I need a word with them," I said. "The rest of you should prepare for the offensive."

I paused.

"Zeze, can you get Indrani down here?" I asked. "I want us with her when we strike."

"I'll see to it," Hierophant promised.

I clapped his shoulder, nodded at the others and went on my way. The hallways that fed into the maze room were relatively straightforward, opulently decorated with few visible defences laid in save for wards. They were grounds the Dead King was prepared to lose, after all: their purpose was to guide invaders in the killing grounds. I passed through knots of soldiers and makeshift infirmaries where priests and mages saw to the wounded – or burned the dead. The Forsworn Healer was there, but I did not stop to speak with him. Soon I stood before the great open gates of the spire, at the top of wide stairs that gave me a wide view of the city, and my stomach clenched at what I saw.

We were losing.

The Grand Alliance's armies had broken into the inner city, overwhelming the ramparts and seizing two gates, but then they'd been pushed behind those walls like rats sealed in a casket. Our hosts had seized wide swaths of Keter's centre and dug in, but relentless tides of undead smashed at their defences even as companies desperately charged into the central plaza to make it past the enemy and into the black spire. It was a battle of attrition now, I saw, and one we could only lose. An hour, two at most, and our armies would break. Before half of that passed they'd grow too feeble to keep mounting offensives into the plaza, cutting off the flow of reinforcements.

We'd have to do with the people we had and whoever arrived in the next quarter hour. If we didn't take our swing at the Dead King soon we were finished. Breathing out shakily, I swept out the gates to find a few makeshift barricades had been raised at the bottom of the stairs and were being manned by hodgepodge mix of soldiers. Legionaries – mine and Nims' both – side by side with Proceran conscripts and League mercenaries. Two pikes that must belong to Spears of Stygia rose high, a woman in magister's robes with them, as Levantines painted in the colours of the Brigand's Blood locked shields with orcs of the Blackspire Clan.

In front of them, swaggering, was the Red Knight. More surprising to me was the presence of the Silver Huntress and the Concocter, who'd evidently made it past the enemy to find the Witch. Still, I saw no sign of either her or Hanno. Or Kreios, for that matter, who should-

To the east a sun lit up the sky, burning through stone houses and towers and hundreds of dead even as air turned so thick and liquid that it seemed as if a curtain had fallen over an entire city bloc. In the heart of it I saw the two robed silhouettes of the dead Titans, bearing livery in Keter's colours of purple and silver. A sight that seemed to enrage the third giant facing them, who pulled down the sky on their heads and let out a shout that echoed across the Crown of the Dead. I glimpsed the sun expanding and turning red, then exploding white for a heartbeat before it contracted and blackened, swallowing everything up before the magic exploded in strings of raw power.

None of the Titans flinched, magic rearing up again as they continued their terrifying clash.

Well Kreios seemed to, uh, have that in hand? A little hard to tell, like Hakram had said, but if I stuck my finger in there I didn't think it'd achieve much except losing me a finger. Best to leave them to it. My gaze shied away, looking instead for Hanno and the Witch. They still weren't with the barricades, but the soldiers there were pointing at something and following *that* I found them. There'd been a push to retake the plaza that had failed, but through the ranks of the dead a small band was running for the spire gates and the two of them had gone out to meet them. There were five – no, six – people sprinting as the dead howled after them.

The Witch of the Woods tossed a spell into the horde, a ball of transparent force that crushed all it rolled over, but it wouldn't be enough. A handful of Revenants had sped ahead of the rest of the undead, the fastest of them an armoured man with a great sword who... My fingers clenched when I realized I was looking at the Blade of Mercy. We hadn't been fast enough to burn his corpse. Most of our dead Named had been recovered and burned, but sometimes it'd been impossible to retrieve the bodies. The runners were Named as well, I recognized. The Mirror Knight was easy to pick out by his armour, as were the Myrmidon and the Kingfisher Prince. The Grave Binder and Affable Burglar took a second look, but my breath caught when I recognized the person at the back of the pack.

That was Akua's armour.

Hanno caught the Blade of Mercy's blow a heartbeat before it struck her back, having sped up massively over his last few steps, and the truth of him was plain to See. The White Knight walked among us again, sword in hand. Hanno's blade blazed with

Light as he drove back the Revenant, parrying a spear thrust from another who'd caught up and holding the rearguard until the Witch struck down with a mass of water than she froze in the heartbeat that followed. A wasteland of ice behind him, the White Knight leisurely retreated while covering the runners the rest of the way. I was down the stairs in moments, on them as they arrived.

"Warden," Hanno smiled.

"White Knight," I returned, clasping his arm when he offered it.

He made a face that, on a prettier man, might have been called a pout.

"That eye of yours does take some pleasure out of things," he complained.

"Not for me," I snorted.

And I was, after all, a villain. I swept through the others, offering nods and claps where I should until I reached Akua. She looked tired, I thought, but far from resigned. My eye dipped to a pouch at her side and she replied with a nod.

"I still have them," she said.

"Did you choose a name?" I asked.

Her smile was sharp enough to cut.

"Fetters," Akua said. "I call them the Fetters."

"It'll do," I said, and gently touched her elbow.

As much to greet her as reassure myself she was there. The Red Knight snorted contemptuously and I addressed her without turning.

"It might do you some good to remember that you don't, strictly speaking, need your tongue to fight for me," I mildly said.

I saw the smile in Akua's eyes she did not allow to touch her face, and when I turned to glance at the Red Knight she looked uncertain. Taken aback by how casually I'd just threatened to rip out her tongue in front of half a dozen heroes. Hanno did look disapproving, but though it was hard to tell with the mask I was pretty the Witch of the Woods was grinning.

"We'll soon be able to push deeper into the spire," I said. "The glass will have cooled."

"The glass?" the Mirror Knight asked, sounding confused.

"Hierophant was in a mood," I shrugged.

It said a lot about the kind of reputation Masego had grown into that not a single person here misunderstood my meaning after that.

"There won't be anyone more Named coming," Prince Frederic told me. "It has been most of an hour since I last spoke with First Princess Rozala, but I believe all we are the last. Everyone else is crippled or dead."

I kept a wince off my face. I'd not counted how many Named there had been in the maze, but it couldn't be more than thirty. More than half the people who'd signed the Truce and Terms were now either dead or out of the fight.

"Then we press on with what we have," I told them. "The Scourges still block our path, but--"

We all went silent. Even the least sensitive of the Named, even those soldiers without a speck of magic to them, felt *it*. Like a fetid warm wind out of a swamp, licking at our skin. It came from where half the maze still stood. *The drakon*, I thought. But how? The Emerald Swords should be keeping it contained.

"Either the Emerald Sword are dead," I grimly said, "or they were tricked."

Heavy silence followed.

"I think," the Concocter hesitantly said, "I think that I know what happened."

My eye went to her, a silent order to keep talking.

"The body it just a corpse," Cocky said. "It's the essence of the drakon that matters. So it might be that the elves are still cutting up a regenerating body but that the essence slipped away."

My breath caught.

"You're saying it's building itself another body," I said. "In there."

*Out of corpses, steel and stone*, I thought. I

"The Dead King's leash on such a thing would be loose," Antigone flatly said. "This may well be the seed of a drakon reborn."

I shivered at that, I wasn't too proud to admit it. I wasn't alone in that either. Few of the people here knew what a drakon even was and yet dread hung heavy in the air. Had the Dead King's monster gotten free? I concentrated, dipped into the darkness of **See**, and the story was there to be found. Strong, the riverbed of it deep and wide. It had been near a certainty from the moment

Below's stories returned and the monster was revealed. *Which means he knew it would happen*, I thought. It was Neshamah, he'd seen that story play out a thousand times before. Which meant it was part of his plan, and when I stopped to consider what a drakon reborn might mean I understood exactly what it was.

He was raising another Evil we needed to stop. We couldn't just fucking ignore this and pass it by as we went to take his head, we'd need to deal with it else Calernia was just as fucked as before: we might not be in a state to stop it after we dealt with the Dead King. The one person who did have a story to lean into against the creature was already busy, stuck in the grooves a story just as strong: the last Titan putting to rest the stolen corpses of his old comrades. *Fuck*, I thought again. We were getting played, *had* gotten played, and it was skillful enough that even if I knew there was no other choice than to pay up on the price.

"Concocter, you still have that piece of the drakon?" I asked.

"I do," she agreed.

"Then you and the Witch need to figure out a way to put it down," I frankly said. "Take whoever you need to get it done. The rest of us go for the Dead King."

"I will finish it," the Witch of the Woods promised me.

"There might not be a way," the Mirror Knight cautioned her.

"Then I will make one," she replied without hesitation. "Whatever the cost."

I nodded, comforted by her determination if nothing else.

"Make your picks quickly," I ordered her. "We're running out of time."

—

*"O Tiferet, ruled by lords fair and just*

*Your sages celebrated far and wide."*

It was a horror.

I had seen dark and ugly things over my years as a villain, but not even the worst of the madness to be found in the Wasteland rivaled the seed of a drakon taking root. Out of the glass it had grown, swallowing up corpses and stone and armour like a tar pit, until a twisted abomination took shape. It had a dragon's long neck and body, but the wings were ragged and full of holes — their patterns hurting the eye — and while a spiked tailed slithered down there were no feet beneath. Only writhing



tentacles of corpse-flesh and eerie, insect-like scuttling legs. It was the mouth that had me nauseous, though. The jaw split four ways, revealing dripping jowls and a sea of teeth that were as glistening knives. Every part of it writhed, moved, faces and armour and limbs looking as if they were trying to wriggle out of the abomination.

To stand in its presence was to feel it biting away at you, eating everything that you were piece by piece. It was not something humans were meant to face, and yet we must. There was no other choice, for it was rampaging all over remains of the maze. With a cruel intelligence it had lacked earlier it snatched up soldiers and trampled banners, leaving some half dead and bleeding out so they might scream out their suffering as they died. The only relief to be had here was that there was not a single Scourge here: the Dead King would not risk them when he was losing control of his monster.

"Go," the Witch of the Woods shouted. "I will draw its attention."

As her sorcery roared, we ran for it. The Woe came to me as we ran through the maze, avoiding swipes of the drakon's limbs that shattered rooms while the Witch struck at it with great icy winds. It was fewer Named than I would have liked who would come with us. The Kingfisher Prince would hold the rearguard with the soldiers and the Red Knight was to stay with him, one meant for leading men and the other killing foes. Then the Witch had taken the Mage – Apprentice had transitioned, fancy that, and she wasn't even done if I saw that right – the Knight Errant, the Myrmidon, the Painted Knife and the Affable Burglar. The Stalwart Apostle was to stay back and heal, with the Stained Sister to keep her alive. And the Concocter, of course.

Hanno and I would get the rest. The Woe, of course. Then the Valiant Champion, the Mirror Knight, the Forsworn Healer, the Daring Pyromancer, the Silver Huntress, the Vagrant Spear, the Page, the Skinchanger and the Grave Binder. Akua as well, of course, though she was not properly named. Sixteen of us to end the King of Death.

It felt like too few, but there was no other choice.

The kept running, squeezing through the smoking halls, and the cloying humidity pressed ever stronger as we approached the drakon's side. It noticed us, even through the winds, and would have swiped if not for the madwoman who leapt on its back and began tearing out its back.

*"Honour to the Blood,"* the Painted Knife shouted.

A heartbeat later she was sent flying, the drakon screaming in irritation, as I heard bones break. Kallia, I realized, might

well just have died. But she'd bought us a moment. We reached the open grounds of glass, marred by the abomination that'd emerged from them, and though it turned its back on the maze to chase us the Witch of the Woods ripped out a chunk of the ceiling and collapsed it on the monster's head. It wouldn't hurt it, we all knew that, but it won us the rest of the way to the stairs. Across smooth black glass we ran, until our feet reached stone and the drakon's fury sounded behind us.

"Don't stop," I shouted. "Keep going. We lose if we slow."

We couldn't know where in the spire the Dead King waited, but it didn't matter. We had enough heroes assembled that providence would lead us there in time and even though we'd played most of the cards we had to play so had Neshamah. He didn't have a lot of defences or defenders left that could stop the crew of sixteen we'd assembled. Only the one, really, and he didn't make us wait long for it. We stumbled out of the stairs into a cavernous great hall, a forest of tall pillars under a curved ceiling so tall I could barely make it out. There were no torches here, no magelights, and yet a dim green light hung about the hall. Our boots found wet tiles as we entered, shallow waters covering swaths of the hall as they looked like emerald mirrors.

Among the pillars at the heart of the room, the Prince of Bones stood waiting.

"They're here," I quietly said. "All of them."

"Then we strike hard from the start," Hanno said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. No, that too was a trap. Sixteen against five with the strong Named we had, we were certain to beat them. But the story would be diluted. Too many of us moving in different directions. What would win out was the simplest one of all: 'the Scourges can kill Named'. We'd win, but our losses would be catastrophic. Like the Maddened Fields, it would be a victory that lost us the war.

"No," I said. "The rest of you go on ahead. This is for the Woe to handle."

The White Knight turned to me, startled, but I raised a hand.

"Don't argue," I ordered. "We don't have the time. We'll engage them, take the opening and go."

He was unhappy, I could see it writ plain on that plain face. But he would not turn his back on the decision we had made at the heart of the tower, when I had devoured the first of the Intercessor's eyes: I was the Warden and so he would obey.

"I'll be waiting for you at the end of the line, Catherine," Hanno of Arwad finally said.

"We began the Truce and Terms together," I smiled. "We'll end them together as well, Hanno."

A curt nod, and he moved. Named followed in his wake, headed to the side of the room and I found golden eyes looking for mine. There was something like grief on Akua's face, and she seemed startled with the intensity of it. Enough that she looked away.

The Woe gathered around me and I let out a long breath, eyes falling on the waiting Prince of Bones.

*"By their golden wisdom without rust,*

*A hundred times did you earn your pride!"*

So that was it, then. The last dance of the Woe. We'd go different ways after the war, should there be an after the war, but we still had today before it came to an end.

"Quite the fight you've picked us," Princess drawled.

"Eh, that's always been the way," Ranger said. "We always find the meanest fucker in the room and throw a drink in his face, it's kind of our thing at this point."

"We have grudges to settle, besides," Warlord grunted. "They've gotten away too many times already."

I rolled my shoulder, limbering it, and slowly unsheathed my sword.

"Let's buy them passage to the Dead King, then," I said.

I took a limping step forward, but Masego suddenly cleared his throat. I stalled and looked back, finding him staring at me disapprovingly.

"You haven't said the words," he complained.

I blinked.

"What words?"

"Our motto," he slowly said, as if addressing a dimwit.

Indrani got it first, letting out a hyena's cackle, and I got what he meant a moment later in utter disbelief.

"Don't you fucking dare," I warned. "Not a single one of you."

"Together," Hierophant enthusiastically said, raising his hand.

Filthy traitors that they were, the others all joined in.

"LIES AND VIOLENCE!"

A moment of silence passed as the Prince of Bones slowly cocked his head to the side. *Yeah, that really happened*, I commiserated.

"I hate you all," I said, meaning every word but one.

This time when I stepped forward, they followed.

My gait was lazy, unhurried, because I could feel it one more. The same sensation that had come upon me in Dormer, when the five of us had been the first into the last breach. Like a rhythm, a second heartbeat that had always been there but never heard.

Ranger, as always, opened the dance.

The unraveller flew, a killing stroke for any Revenant's flesh it found. The Prince of Bones did not move, the Hawk's black arrow shattering the artefact in flight, but the song was in our ears and our feet followed. Hakram tore forward, a roar in his throat as he raised the greatsword, and the water beneath our feet stirred as the Tumult's sorcery woke.

"No," Hierophant mildly said, and Wrested the spell.

With perfect coordination the magic was shaped into frost and tossed onto the pillar to Hakram's side, catching the Seelie's side as she flickered into existence. I hummed, Night thrumming in my veins as I sunk tendrils into the stone and pulled the pillar down on her head. A curse shivered past the spine of the pillar as it fell, the Mantle's armoured form wading out of deep water. Vivienne's half-step to the side, light-footed as when she had been the Thief, took her out of the path just long enough for her to ram her sword through the Seelie's throat.

She exploded into a storm of fading flower petals and the Princess frowned. Something inside of her grew, sharpened. Not quite there yet, but soon.

Indrani shot the Hawk's arrow before it could take the Vagrant Spear in the eye on the very same heartbeat where Warlord's sword met the Prince of Bones'. Steel rang against steel, both monstrous blades scrapping the other's edge, but Hakram would lose out in strength. It didn't matter, because as I slowly limped forward I had been spreading Night in the water. I thumped the butt of my staff against the stone and tendrils of water rose, tugging at the Prince's feet. He was too heavy to fall that easily, but the Mantle had to throw a curse at the water and to free him and that gave Vivienne an opportunity to disappear in the dark between the pillars. Princess or not, she remained a sneak at heart. Ranger shot the Mantle in the back of the head,

the Hawk's arrow just a shade too slow to catch it, but it slid against the metal. The angle had been a little off.

On the other side of the room I saw the last of them, the Grave Binder, get onto the stairs. They were through, and now we could get serious.

I breathed out, forming eyes of Night all around me. One, a dozen, a hundred – a thousand. After all, I knew exactly what was coming. A heartbeat later the Mantle called down darkness over the heart of the hall, where she and Hakram and the Prince were fighting. Through my dead eye I gauged the distances, gathering Night to my hand, and let loose a spear of Night. It streaked forward into the dark, clipping the side of the Mantle's shoulder and disrupting her hold on the curse. All was revealed, just in time for me to see Warlord being forced a step back by the Prince, sword slammed into the ground as the armoured behemoth slammed their heads.

Hakram took a step back, dazed, but Ranger's arrow hit the Mantle in the articulation of her armour's wrist. It released Light when snapped – the Blessed Artificer's work, had to be – which stepped the Scourge cold before she could break Warlord's neck with her mace. The song quickened, four streaks of lightning forming near the ceiling. A halfway clever way to get around the limitation of Wrest, which could only seize one magical source at a time. Only Hierophant ripped out one of the streaks before it finished forming, striking at the others with it even as I drew on Night and closed the distance with the melee.

The last of the lightning shattered a pillar, guided by Hierophant's hand, and a heartbeat later there was the sound of someone falling into water. The Hawk, I saw through eyes of Night. Masego had found her, and her ragged cloak splashed as she rose from the puddles. I'd have to leave that to Indrani, since I – in the blind spot of my eye the Seelie flicked into being, aiming at my spine, but I swept wide with my staff. As I struck nothing, I realized with dim surprise that she'd tricked me: this once, the first blow had not been an illusion. I threw myself to the side, already knowing it'd be too slow, but then a sword rammed into the Seelie's back.

"Eighth-rate," Princess said, tone cold as she ripped the blade free.

The Scourge crumbled into a bed of flowers, to my anger, but at the sight of it the bundle of power inside her took shape and set. Coming into her aspect, Vivienne Dartwick let out a sharp breath.

"So that's it," she murmured. "You've just been tricking us."

A glance at me.

"Catherine, *burn.*"

I did not question it, turning to drown the flowers in black flame even as behind me the Prince of Bones swung at my head – only to be stopped by Hakram's parry, blades slamming into the ground as Masego Wrested the Mantle's cursed and smashed it into the Prince's side. The flowers lit up like kindling and with hoarse scream gathered back together, turning into the Seelie once more. Oh, I thought. This entire time, the petals had never faded during any of our fights. She'd just used an illusion to make it look like they did while she put herself back together out of sight. The Scourge screamed, wings erupting out of her back, but I swung with the strength of my Name behind me: the slash opened her throat, cutting into the bone yet but not hard enough to go through. Vivienne, swift as a viper, put a dagger through the Seelie's eye and dug deep. She knelt, grabbing my sword even as I pivoted to slap away a curse of the Mantle's with my staff and reply with burst of raw power that she had to block with her mace, and Princess leaned on her own Name strength to finish the cut all the way through.

The Seelie went still, and in the same heartbeat that Vivienne cut off her head the Scourge rammed her dagger into my successor's throat.

A scream welled up in my throat, too raw to be a word, and then the Princess exploded into a shower of fragrant flowers. She formed back a moment later, on her feet and smiling icily.

"I can Trick people too, you know," Princess said. "It's not that hard."

*See through tricks*, I glimpsed in her, *and mimic them*. The learning wouldn't stay in her long, that was the limitation, but some part of Vivienne Dartwick had decided she would no longer fall for the same trick twice with such utter determination that Creation itself had answered. It was fitting I thought, for of all of us she had had grown into the one most resolute to learn from her mistakes. One down and four to go. The song swelled in agreement, the chorus whispering in my ear as the five of us moved as one. As Vivienne faded into the shadow of the pillars behind me, I turned back to the fight and joined Hakram's side.

The Prince of Bones and the Mantle towered over us, masses of steel wielding more of the same, but I was not afraid. Hakram Deadhand had stood at my side since the beginning of this, and he'd stand there still when we ended it.

The Prince struck and Warlord met him, muscles tearing at the contest of strength while I slipped behind the giant's back to avoid the Mantle's shivering curse. Above us magic warred against itself, the Tumult having lost patience and now trying to overwhelm Hierophant with brute strength and numbers, but across

the green-mirrored water Hakram and I danced. The might of the titans broke stone and howled through the air but we were ever one step ahead, wind rustling over the water as we avoided death by a hair's breadth and struck back. I struck the Mantle's knee from the back and Hakram took off her hand, the two of us stepping out of the Prince's blow as Ranger killed the Hawk's arrow.

The Prince rushed me and I withdrew, leg throbbing, as Hakram smashed the Mantle's side and my staff trailed along the water. A trail of Night slithered until my back was to a pillar and the Prince of Bones' hulking shape was mere feet away, not even bothering to use the sword to crush me. Instead I smiled and turned the Night solid, the nooses I'd attached around his feet solidifying around a pillar to his back. He ripped through it with his weight and momentum even though I'd tied it at the base, but I still got what I wanted: he toppled forward even as I took a measured step to the side, helmeted head smashing into the pillar in front of him.

"O Sve Noc," I prayed as I raised my blade, "I ask you not salvation but grant me *spite*."

The Sisters smiled against my neck, talons digging into my shoulders, and the edge of my sword shone black as I carved into the Prince's neck. Going through layer after layer of steel until my momentum was gone and my sword stuck, I ripped it clean at angle that sliced even deeper. All the way through. A kick sent the Prince of Bones' head tumbling into the water, but the Scourge still leaned on his sword to get back on his feet. Unmoved.

That was when I heard the scream and the music stalled.

I looked through Night, seeing Vivienne crumple to the ground behind the Hawk as spikes of rim tore through her back. She turned to flowers, but the Hawk turned and shot a black arrow into them. She turned back into her true form, writhing and with an arrow through the stomach. I ran, leaving the Prince to rise behind me, and ducked under the Mantle's swing as Warlord finally hacked through her arm. The limb and weapon dropped, but she touched his burnt plate and it shrivelled as he let out a roar of pain. I could see Indrani firing at her so I kept running past them, my dead eye watching as an unraveller went right in the stump and the Mantle lit up before dropping like a stringless puppet.

The Hawk nocked another arrow as Vivienne tried to get back on her feet, bleeding badly, and I tossed a ball of hast spear of blackflame at the Scourge. It moved only just enough to get out of the way and I had to close my eye as a burst of lightning fell on my head – only to veer off at the last moment and smash into the Hawk's side. She dropped twitching in the water as Vivienne

ripped the arrow clean and staggered to her feet, leaning against the pillar. Only Hakram screamed behind me, because the Tumult had prepared two spells. A whirlwind of ice and water swallowed him whole, throwing him at the ceiling even as I got to Vivienne a laid my hand on her side. Masego would have to catch him, I was busy.

Night stemmed the bleeding, but I couldn't *heal*. I couldn't get her through this. No poison, though, I realized with a sliver of relief.

"Hide," I ordered. "And get to Masego."

She nodded, shivering. Movement at the edge of my vision caught my eye but it wasn't the Hawk getting out. It was, I realized with horror as a streak of sleekness broke the surface, an arrow. Somehow the Scourge had been able to use a bow from underwater. I froze, seeing how it would punch into my stomach, but knowing that if I moved it would kill Vivienne for sure. That wasn't even a choice. I pulled on Night, knowing it'd be too slow. It might save my life, if it wasn't poisoned and- scarf trailing behind her, Ranger's longknife shone green as she cut through the arrow. If she were still the Archer, I dimly thought, she wouldn't have made it in time. The arrow shattered and I shaped the Night I'd gathered into raw heat, throwing at the water.

It turned into trails of vapour, revealing a scalded Hawk, and in a heartbeat Indrani was on the Scourge.

At a distance, bow in hand, they were a match for each other. But the Hawk avoided fighting up close for a reason, and Indrani was no longer the Archer. The first blow cut through the bow, the second took three fingers and an eye. The Hawk stepped back, trying to make distance, but Ranger moved smooth as silk: a step turned into a beautiful thrust, the longknife piercing the Scourge's throat. All the way through. It wriggled, still moving, but with a simple pivot she struck with her second blade and the Hawk's hooded head went flying. It was a victory, one she had craved for years now, but there was no time to celebrate.

"Get the Tumult," I ordered.

I let Vivienne stand on her feet, waiting a moment to see whether she'd collapsed before moving away. Hakram was duelling the Prince of Bones again, and their blades were so swift they were a blur to the eye. He should have folded, crumpled under the Scourge's strength, but I could See it in him. A rising tide of red, the heat and anger he had only learned to taste after he embraced the people he'd never thought of himself as part of. **Rage**, his soul sang, the aspect bolstering strength and limbs. It would not fail him so long as he remained in the throes of the red, ever rising until it burned itself out. I went for the Prince's back, gathering Night, when there was a crackle of



lightning and Ranger let out a scream. I looked through eye and saw she'd struck at the Tumult only to hit a shield of lightning, a trap already laid.

Masego ripped it down and I focused my Night again, but in that heartbeat of distraction the other fight turned: the Prince's sword came down and Hakram's leg was cut clean through. It was steel, though, prosthetic, and even as he fell Warlord lunged for his enemy's throat. I shouted and dragged back the Scourge's sword arm with tendrils of Night. Yet even as Hakram began tearing inside the Prince's armour with his hands, death and steel on death and steel, the other hand picked him up by the neck and smashed him into the floor.

There was a loud, horrifying crack.

His spine. That'd been his spine. Warlord twitched on the ground as the Prince of Bones ripped out his arm, the steel limb and a great boot rose. I unleashed a torrent of Night at its back, beginning to topple it but not nearly quickly enough.

"No," I screamed.

"**Ruin**," Hierophant hissed, face red with fury.

The aspect he had meant to keep for the Dead King rippled through the air and struck the Scourge like a hammer blow. The giant mass of steel creaked, then metal screamed as it began to *crumple* like cheap tin. The Prince of Bones fell apart, limb by limb, until the all the layers slid off and all that was left was a pile of naked, twisted bone. It moved feebly, twitching, and the Warlord's dead hand, the only part of him that was not trembling, closed around his neck. He dragged it close, roaring as the last of his **Rage** burned and the orc's fangs tore through the Scourge's spine. It stopped moving. He did not, still twitching uncontrollably.

I pulled Night to me, the air cold and clear, and watched through an eye as once more Indrani tripped a defensive spell and was thrown back. The Tumult, the sleeves of its robes ripped off and the bones of it fresher than the rest, went still for a moment. Its eyes burned red, then it poured all it had left into a streak of three spells. Masego killed the first, unhesitating. I drowned the second, a rain of ice shards, in a well of darkness. The third was a sharp gust of wind meant to kill Hakram on the ground, and Hierophant flicked his wrist to make a shield in the way. And the wind stopped, but a small dot of darkness went right through. A curse. The Dead King had leant a hand.

I loosed a burst of Night at Hakram to push him out of the way but it only clipped his shoulder. It didn't move him enough. And none of us were close enough, Indrani's arrow was too far, and as the dot of darkness hit his scalp it was caught. Half of it, I

saw with excruciating precision through eyes of Night, was caught by pale fingers as Vivienne Dartwick threw herself forward. Both of them seized up, but where he went utterly still she burst into a storm of flowers. Blood red, like the song, and they fell all over him. He was, I saw, still breathing. My eyes, all of them, turned to the Tumult and in that moment I saw the truth of it.

It was stitched together from the souls of many mages, but one of those souls had been the foundation. It was released at Hainaut but traces of it remained, like sutures for the Scourge, and they were everything. They were how the Dead King had made this creature in the first place. It'd been a necromancer, one, someone that could steal knowledge from the dead and use it. Those aspects were now the beating heart of the Revenant, what allowed it to exist. I raised a hand, gathering Night, and a streak of shadow formed above the Tumult. It was just an aspect, I thought. Gods, I'd been a fool.

**"Silence,"** I harshly said.

And just like that the sutures disappeared. The souls began to pull every which way, the magic that'd been gathering breaking apart, and the Scourge stared blindly as the shadow deepened, expanded. Dread Empress Tenebrous massive leg shot through, crushing the Tumult like an egg with one of the most satisfying sounds I'd ever heard. I slumped to my knees as the leg withdrew, shadows fading behind it, and stayed there panting for a long moment. It was over. We'd won.

The song began to fade, exhaustion replacing it.

Sheathing my sword, I leaned on my staff to get back to my feet. Vivienne had taken human shape again and Masego was healing her, Indrani catching up to me as we limped to their side.

"What was it?" I croaked out. "The curse."

"I don't know," Princess admitted, face pale. "I just knew it'd destroy me if I remained me."

She was sweating and shivering. Too much blood loss, and despite Masego's best efforts that arrow wound refused to close completely. The Hawk's aspect at work, I guessed. The wound was fighting to be lethal. My eye moved to Masego for answers.

"It was a mind-killer," Hierophant said.

My jaw clenched as I forced myself to look at Hakram. He'd stopped twitching after being hit with the curse and would have looked like he was sleeping, were he not missing two limbs and his face swollen.

"How much of him remains?" I asked, voice choking up.

"I've contained the curse," Hierophant said, "and Vivienne took on half of it. If he wakes, he will have lost some memories but retain his faculties."

"If?" Indrani asked.

"I cannot promise he will," Masego admitted. "A healer in Light might do better, but I cannot."

Then he flicked a look at Vivienne, whose breath was laboured. Sweat poured down her face.

"You need one as well," he said. "You still have even odds of dying otherwise."

Ad the healers, we all knew, were behind us. While neither were in a state to move on their own. I clenched my fingers. Now that one song had faded, I heard, another returned in its stead.

*"O Tiferet, where have you gone now,*

*Where went the song the river gave?"*

I breathed out, all my eyes but one fading as I looked around us. This ruin of a room where only desperation and use of an aspect we had meant for the Dead King had kept two of the Woe form dying. And they might yet find their doom among these beautiful green mirrors, I knew, if I made the wrong choice. The cold part of me knew what should be done: whatever helped our chances of beating the Dead King. But I wasn't the girl I'd been at seventeen, savagely ruthless in defence of what I saw as a greater good. Indrani had once told me that in offering the Woe a hearth I had turned wild beats into tamed ones, but that sword cut both ways.

I wasn't willing to give the order anymore, not the one I should.

"Indrani," I said.

She looked like I'd slapped her, hazelnut eyes blazing with anger.

"You can't be serious," she said, "not when you're heading into a fight with-"

"It has to be you," I softly interrupted. "You know that. You're the one who'll get her there before she dies."

"I can't leave you to fight the Hidden Horror alone," Indrani pleaded. "What if..."

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to. Masego limped to her side, laying a gentle hand on her wrist.

"She won't be alone, Indrani," he said. "I go with her."

"That's worse," she whispered. "I won't be able to protect either of you."

She set her jaw then looked away, drawing back from her touch. The look she gave me was unhappy but resigned.

"I swore to myself I wouldn't get like this," Indrani said. "I guess I'm not better than that, after all."

"I wouldn't be able to keep going if it wasn't you taking care of them," I told her.

"Liar," she ruefully smiled. "That's once today, Catherine Foundling. Don't disappoint me again by dying without me."

She helped up Vivienne and knelt, slinging Hakram's unconscious body over her shoulder. After one last lingering look she turned her back, heading for the stairs. I took a moment to steady my breath, Masego's solid presence at my side a comfort as I looked at the emerald grave where we had buried the Scourges.

*"O Tiferet, where I gave love my vow,*

*Why have you become an empty grave?"*

We shared a look and I nodded. Nothing more needed to be said: Hierophant and I hurried down the empty hallway, our footsteps echoing as we ran. We would get there in time, I could feel it. We'd be there for the end of the Dead King's story.

*"Oh why have you become,"* Yara of Nowhere sadly sang, *"an empty grave?"*

## **Chapter 67: And Justice For All (Redux)**

*"Learn this: all is finite, all ends. The only worthy act in existence is to seek the breaking of that fundamental truth."*

*– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King*

And up the spire we went, seeking the King of Death.

This was his last redoubt, the fortresses where he would find either end or victory, and so even though his greatest forces were all spent it was far from empty. Room after room stood filled with traps and troops, guarded by Revenants and closed by wards older than any living memory but the Riddle-Maker's. Yet none of troubled Hierophant and I as we climbed the spire, for

the White Knight had led a company of Named through them and in their wake they left only utter ruin.

Traps lay ripped open, the bones of armies were strewn all over the floor and the keening remnants of wards torn through sang their dirge over the broken remains of the Revenants that had fought that unflinching warband. They'd gone through, I saw as I trailed fingers down the chord if them, like a hot knife through butter. Taking hits but never hard enough to be knocked down, trampling the Dead King's defences through a simple difference in weight. The heroes, after all, must reach the end of the story. They had to face the tyrant. Anything that stood in the way of that would be swept away like a stone fighting the current.

Yet as our feet hastened across the wrecks of defences that would have given even the finest soldiers of Calernia pause, I realized that one more Neshamah had played a trick on us. We had found the monster beneath the spire and then fought it at its bottom. The Scourges had waited for us after a mere flight of stairs, awaiting our deathmatch within the emerald grave. We'd stayed there, fighting and planning and hoping – thinking victory was in our grasp. And in doing so we'd been carefree in spending the one thing we were running out: time.

We were, at most, two hours away from annihilation. And that was if our armies held by some miracle, the finest of outcomes. In practice I expected we had half of that at most. The Dead King had filled his spire with traps and dead and sorceries, but they weren't truly his line of defence. That was, as it'd been since the start of this, *time*. It was the simplest thing in the world, so simple we'd overlooked it.

He would be waiting for us at the top of the spire, and it'd take time to get there.

I could see in the lay of battlefields when it had occurred to Hanno what was happening, the way he and the Vagrant Spear had started to strike forward aggressively. They had to be taking hits out of that, some wounds even, but with the Forsworn Healer among them they'd be able to stay in the fight. Ruin by ruin I saw as worry turned to haste and then impatience, the wrecks now reeking of Light as the heroes began to brute force their way through. *It's what he wants, Hanno, I thought. To exhaust us before we get to him. Look at the defences he's built.*

Traps that had to be dodged or broken, troops unimpressive but in large numbers, Revenants that'd need Light or aspects to slay quickly. Wards that were possible to break and overpower, but only if Named put their back into it. None of it was meant to stop them cold, the Dead King knew better than that. They couldn't be, he'd be fighting the story when trying. So instead he was grinding them down into exhaustion, flushing out all their tricks before they made it to his last throne room. The reigning

king of attrition was up to his favourite game once more, ending his war the same way he had begun it. There was something almost admirable about that, I thought. There was no lie in Neshamah, no compromise.

The Dead King was true to his nature, horror that it was.

Halfway up the spire, I saw when the others made their decision. One of the walls was melted through, what had to be the Pyromancer's work and no small amount of effort. Through the opening I saw Keter sprawled out below. There were some traces of fighting further ahead, we saw, but it ended at a set of wards. Undead milled on the other side, looking confused. None of them tried to cross it.

"Not the Dead King's work, these," I muttered.

"The Grave Binder," Hierophant told me, looking fascinated. "Clever work. It prevents the dead from passing, but also from noticing it exists at all."

Which told me they'd not gone through here. Hanno had made the right call: they needed to fly up. Most likely they'd ridden the Skinchanger, she had flying shapes large enough to carry most of them at once. Might have been two trips, but with a strong enough vanguard it wouldn't matter. Fortunately, though we lacked a shapeshifter we were not without means to catch up. I limped over to the edge, letting out a sharp whistle as I stared into the falling ash, but she'd already been on her way. Zombie was a good girl, after all. She'd felt the need even before I did.

Great crow's wings scattered the rain of ash as glided through the air, casually evading a ballista bolt from far below as she turned and made straight for the hole in the wall. I hastily backed away, running into Masego, who saw the approaching hippocorvid over my head. We tripped backwards in a sprawl, Zombie landing in a faint clutter of hooves and slowing until she stood over the both of us with a faintly smug look. I was reluctantly impressed she could manage that with a beak.

"We'll talk about his later," I promised her.

She let out an unimpressed caw as Masego and I dragged ourselves back to our feet, dusting off. I sat the saddle without difficulty but Zeze was rather more wary.

"It *is* a necromantic construct," he reminded himself in a mutter. "Much more reliable than a horse."

Well, whatever helped him not throw up on my back. He slipped behind me awkwardly – the saddle wasn't really made for two – and closed his arms around my shoulders, though I did notice he stopped to stick himself to the saddle with a spell. Fancy.

"Why do these people keep building these enormous fucking towers," I complained. "One, just once, I would like a nice ground floor lair. No drops at all, just solid architecture without all the goddamn hubris."

On that cheerful note, I spurred Zombie onwards and she charged out into the emptiness. An old scream tried to bubble up my throat but I stubbornly kept my lips closed as my mount glided forward, falling into wide arc before she began batting her wings to gain height. We went around the spire, circling ever higher, until I suddenly pulled on the reins. Zombie went into a glid, cawing with confusion, and Masego stiffened behind me. I ignored both, my eye on the camp laid out below. It had not occurred to me, in the moment, what it meant that our armies were stranded in the inner city. They were cut off from our fortified camp, now but the opposite was also true and the armies of the dead were swarming our defences. In multiple places they had breached the palisades, the small forces left behind giving ground where they were not outright swept away.

And nowhere was the swarm thicker than around the ealamal, where I could see soldiers mounting a desperate defence from behind heavy wards.

*Cordelia*, I thought. In worry for her, but also of her. If her position was overwhelmed, if she thought the weapon was about to fall into enemy hands... No, I told myself. It wouldn't come to that. She would not pull the trigger until there was no other choice left, and it was my role to ensure she had one. I knew Cordelia Hasenbach. I'd known her as my opponent and then as my ally, and now I thought I might be coming to know her as a friend. And the woman who'd sat across me in Serolen, who'd called me vicious but meant it as a compliment, I trusted her. Either too much or not enough, I thought, but still I trusted her.

She would not fail me if I did not fail her.

I loosened my grip on the reins, leaving Zombie to begin circling upwards again. It wasn't all that hard to find where they'd gotten back into the tower: on level near the top was a ring of tainted glass windows and a few of them had been broken. There was no sign of fighting, but layers of wards had been broken through recently enough the shattered sorcery had not entirely collapsed. Exotic effects – swirls of colours, airless currents and some sort of golden translucence – lingered as Zombie plunged through the broken windows, trampling shards of glass.

I dismounted, helping Masego down and send off Zombie with an affectioned slap on the rump. Best she did not stick around when the greatest necromancer Calernia had ever known was so close. Like the forest of columns where we had fought the Scourges, the entire level was but a single room. It was all bare stone made

into something eerie by the light filtering through the coloured glass, only the stretch where Hanno had smashed through forcing a slice of the world outside. There was a... stillness to this place that was uncomfortable to me, and even Masego seemed wary.

At the end of the room a set of elegant ivory stairs rose, leading at what could only be the spire's very summit.

I breathed out, settled my beating heart. While I could not hear any fighting from above, there was no doubt in my mind it had already begun. All that was left was for us to join it.

"Ready?" I asked, as much for him as to settle the last of my nerves.

"I have been waiting years now," Masego softly said, "to even these scales. To take... how is that your people call it, Catherine?"

"A long price," I murmured.

"Yes," the dark-skinned mage smiled, not a speck of friendliness to it. "A long price, and long have I waited to exact it."

Hierophant's Name settled on his shoulders like a cloak, rising to answer the will of the man who bore it.

"Today will be the day," Masego simply said.

There was no need for a boast, not when the words were spoken with such chilling certainty. Our footsteps feeling so loud against the stone, we crossed the room and climbed the pale stairs. Every inch of the ivory was sculpted, I saw, the work so fine and subtle I had missed it from across the hall. Each was a battle, a host of crusaders coming to take the head of the King of Death.

We stepped on their corpses on our way to his throne room.

After all the beauty and horror we had found within the Dead King's spire, I had expected to find a gripping sight awaiting us. Instead the immortal seat of Neshamah Be-Iakim was a bleak, barren place. A great hall of old stone, curved pillars rising from the stone tiles like ribs to hold up an unadorned ceiling. From tall rafters hung two rows of banners, none twice the same. I found the Fairfax bells and the Papenheim wall, Stygia's cranes and Praes' tower. Near every royal line of Procer, most of the great cities of Callow and even Ashur's crowned ships. Each the banner of a great house, a great host, and now all of them hung limp from rafters. Never to know wind again.

They all led to the end of the hall, the end of this spire and the Crown of the Dead itself. There sat the King of Death, atop a



dais of four steps. It was a simple thing, his throne. The same black stone he had raised steles and towers in, the seat's back rising high until it ended in a crescent around the heraldry of the banner behind it. Ten silver stars set in a circle around a pale crown, all on deep purple cloth plunging down from the ceiling. It did not quite cover what lay behind banner and throne, a great gate of silver filigree depicting the lay of Creation and all surrounded it. All in never-ending movement, Arcadia and Heavens and Hells forever spinning around us in the void.

And under it waited the Hidden Horror, wearing the same body he has before he became either hidden or horror. Neshamah Be-Iakim had been pale in life, like one who saw too little of sun, and kept the tone in death. His hair was dark and short, his eyebrows bushy and his lips full. Neither tall nor short, he had a scholar's build and would have passed for one if not for his light brown eyes. In the dim of the room they seemed golden, as if to make up for the slim circle of bone he wore as a crown. His robes were simple, purple and pale, and as Masego and I set foot in his hall he raised a hand.

In a flutter a movement, a bird landed on his fingers. A sparrow, I saw. Long dead, for all that its feathers and lost none of their luster.

"Warden," the Dead King greeted me, then glanced to my right. "Masego."

Hierophant's jaw clenched. Feeling my boot touch roughness beneath it, my gaze dipped and I found that the stone tile beneath it was inscribed with a name. *Prince Estienne Barthen*, it read. My gaze swept the room, finding hundreds of tiles, thousands. Near every one with a name, but some kept empty. Waiting to be filled. We stood atop a graveyard of the braves who'd thought they could beat death, I realized. If we died today, would our names be engraved with the rest?

And where, in the name of the Gods Above and Below, were the others?

"Neshamah," I replied. "I've gotta say, your hospitality's taken a turn for the worse lately."

"Has it?" the old horror mused. "I had though my reception most fitting for the manner of guests you've been."

At my side Masego's glass eye was moving wildly under the eye cloth, the reason I was buying time with this idle talk in the first place. That the Dead King was *letting* me, was not a good sign. My friend stiffened, and I knew it'd be bad news before he even opened his mouth.

"Most of this hall is not in Creation," Hierophant evenly said. "It a hundred different realms, carved out of Arcadia."

Keter itself, I knew, had no mirror in Arcadia. No crossing point. We had thought that was because it had been annihilated, but now I was guessing otherwise. Masego, when possessed by the Dead King, had taken Liesse into a stolen shard of Arcadia that'd been severed from the greater realm. *He used the same trick here, I thought, or something close to it.* That was why we couldn't see any of the others, too. They were all in shards.

"So we can't get to you without passing your crucible," I mused.

The monster, the crucible and the pivot. I'd now found the second of the three. The old horror raised his hand and the sparrow flew away.

"You will find, Catherine," the Dead King said, "that there are adversaries beyond the teachings you so desperately clutch to even at his late, *late* hour."

"Might be," I smiled back. "But you know me, Neshamah: I've always been a little slow to learn my lessons."

The air shivered, and thirty feet in front of us a corpse dropped. A man, I saw in robes of gold and red. His trimmed beard and long hair were drenched with water, as was the rest of him, and the corpse looked swollen. Waterlogged. The Daring Pyromancer's cadaver stayed there on the tiles, rivulets of water slowly spreading.

"It does not matter," the Dead King replied, "for I am a patient man."

There could be no more waiting, I knew, lest bodies continue to drop. I turned to Masego, getting a nod, and without another word took a single step forward.

—

All I found was darkness.

I had grown used to night and Night over the years, but what awaited me inside the shard was not the same. It was not anything natural, not even the kind of darkness you found in the depths of the Everdark. Even there you could find something... real about it, a tangibility. A reassurance that you were in Creation. There was not a speck of that in here. It was not just an absence of light but of everything, not a single sensation to be found save for solid ground beneath my feet. No foe came for me, no blade was swung or curse woven. I had stepped into a shard of nothing, and as I wandered I learned the nature of the trap: there had been a way in, but I knew of no way out.

I could wander this place for an eternity and never find one.

How long did I waste, walking forward? It was hard to tell. Time was nothing here, far enough from Creation that even the gift of the Sisters had gone silent. I spread Night around me but found no boundaries, no limits, even though I knew that the shard must have them. Frustration mounting at how the very first shard I'd found was stumping me, I stopped and forced myself to calm. There was a way out, it was the way traps like this worked. It was just being kept away from me somehow.

"This has got to be the single most boring trap ever made, *right?*"

A voice I should not have been able to hear, not under the rules of this place, reached my ear. Even if I'd not known what Yara of Nowhere sounded like, I would have known who was speaking. Who else could reach me in a place like this? I spread Night around in thin tendrils, trying to find her, but the Intercessor remained frustratingly out of reach.

"That's not going to work," the Wandering Bard amusedly told me. "Besides, there's no need for it. I'm here to *help* you, Catherine."

I tried to tell her to fuck off, but no matter how much I moved my mouth no sounds came out.

"There's no need to be rude," Yara scolded me. "You're the one who ate my eyes, Cat, not the other way around. Surely we can have a civilized conversation."

It was not possible for Night to burn in this place either, I discovered to my mounting displeasure.

"Well, maybe not quite yet," the Intercessor admitted. "But we'll get there, don't you worry about it."

A soft, rueful laugh.

"We've got until the end of the world," she said. "That's plenty of time, as these things go."

She was gone a moment later, the faint traces of her presence vanished, and I forced myself to calm down. Whatever her game was now, letting her upset me could only help it. And, whatever she'd come here for, she had shown me it was possible to come and go from this shard. I still didn't entirely know how the Bard got around, save that it was bound to an aspect and dependent on Named, but that was something I could use. She was not the only one who'd learned to **See** stories. Opening my dead eye, I found the stars in the void that were the Named around me. Even the

Dead King himself, at the end of the hall. From there, it was simply a matter of walking towards him.

The ground was shifting, I realized after only a few steps. Or maybe the shard itself did, because leaving Night hanging in the air hadn't tipped me off about the direction changes. The trap kept you contained by making sure you were never able to reach the edge. Something that couldn't keep me, not when I had a morning star in the distance to follow. It wasn't long before I found the boundary, laying a hand against it and feeling another shard pulsing on the other side. I worried my lip, pausing for a heartbeat. *Did she put me on the path to figuring this out?* No, I reminded myself, it didn't matter. The Intercessor had been so careful to obscure everything about what she really wanted that playing guessing games could only end in a loss.

I crossed into the next shard, blinking in discomfort at the intensity of a soft ambient light. It felt like the sun itself, after the last shard. I was standing in a cube, I saw, about a hundred feet long in every direction. The ground was featureless and the boundaries I felt ahead gave off a... hardened feeling compared to the last. Like I'd have to pry it open instead of cross. The only warning I got was the movement of air, for there was not a sound. I warily glanced up and though I was looking at a mirror until I realized it was water. A mass of it, falling down on my head.

"Fuck," I swore, pulling on Night.

My shadow lengthened, spread and swelled as I hastily guided it above my head. The water poured through into the nothing there, but it wasn't wide enough and on the sides the tide clapped down as I poured Night into the shadow to spread it even further. I was swept off my feet by the rebounding waters, armour and cloak and fighting me as I forced myself back on my knees while the tide reached my shoulders. With a grunt I finished it, turning my shadow into a veil that went from side to side of the cube and ate the mass of water that should be crushing and drowning me. Panting and drenched, I got myself back to my feet and waded through the water to the border of the cube. It'd be tricky, I knew.

There would be a moment between my shadow withdrawing and my crossing the hardened border where I'd be vulnerable. Taking a deep breath, I flattened myself at the bottom of the water for a semblance of protection and released the Night.

The boundary fought me, resisting the crossing, and something like a titan's hammer blow struck me from above. Before I could pass out, though, I got through with a scream of triumph. Which turned into a simple scream, when I was yanked forward into the other shard. Thousands of clawed limbs tore at my armour from every direction, looking for weaknesses as writhing bodies

pressed against me. Horrifying screams and gibbering laughter filled my ears as I felt claws rip into my flesh even as I huddled together and drew on Night. There was no room to do more than wriggle: the shard had been entirely filled with thousands of devils, crammed so there was barely even room to breathe.

*"Have it back,"* I snarled, and opened my shadow.

The tide I had just devoured poured out below me, the pressure crushing the devils like overripe melons as I scrabbled for the boundary I could feel ahead. It was a small shard, was meant to be. I'd only have moments until the water became my doom, reached and drowned me, but as devils pulled at the Mantle of Woe I crawled forward until my hand found the border. There were Named on the other side, I could See it, and so it was with a hoarse shout that I battered my way out. I fell through on my knees, bleeding from the cheeks and elbows where claws had found room in the plate, and landed wild-eyed in the middle of a fight.

The Vagrant Spear ducked under a spout of bright-red flame, the Daring Pyromancer risen a Revenant watching her with swollen bloodshot eyes as he guided his magic to continue hounding her. There was power in the fresh Revenant, pulsing still, and it could not escape my eye when it had burned so bright. **Raise**, the power had claimed. It was the source of his power to make Revenants, I thought, but it was... rough here. Used in haste, a cruder form of his usual method. And already I could see the trace of the first aspect fading as another replaced it, though it was not yet clear. It related to rule, I thought, or perhaps sovereignty.

Rising to my feet, leaning on my staff, I saw that we stood halfway through the hall and that Sidonia and I were not the only one to have reached here. The Mirror Knight stood hunched behind his shield, and it was a mark of how unsettled I'd been after the last shard that I had not noticed until now. He was, after all, being drowned in magic. At the bottom of the Dead King's dais four robed skeletons were standing as they unleashed torrents of sorcery at Christophe de Pavanie. Red lightning crackled against the shield, turning to steam frost that kept burning before it could creep past the edge of it, and what appeared to be a blow of curses simply slid off like rain.

The only sorcery appearing to find purchase was rippling, transparent kinetic force trying to rip the shield out of his grasp and forcing the Mirror Knight to stand hunched as he fought the magic with brute strength.

*"I do appreciate,"* I croaked out, *"that you don't stop being fucking ridiculous even when we're on the same side, Christophe."*

Reaching out with a tendril of Night, I slipped past him and grabbed the boundary of the shard he'd need to enter before

getting any further. From the corner of my eye I saw the Pyromancer body swivel my way as he let out a shout in a language that rang in my ears, a snake of white flame erupting from his outstretched hand, but the Vagrant Spear moved in a blur and cut through it with her Light-wreathed spear. Focus never wavering, I pulled open the shard and to my mild amusement a storm of fire came exploding out. It smashed through the streams of magic and into the Mirror Knight, who stoically bore it and was merely knocked a few feet back. His stance never even wavered.

The magics were interrupted, though, and when the White Knight burst out of thin air with his armour smoking I knew the tide was tipping in our favour. **Save**, his soul sang out. Not the last aspect he'd come into, but he was leaning hard into it still. Enough that it obscured the other some, though not entirely to my lone eye. **Recall** had never gone anywhere, but the latest addition had my brow rising. **Undo**? It felt like the Grey Pilgrim's own **Forgive**, but there were... nuances. Not necessarily resurrection, it could be other things, and there was a limitation that Tariq hadn't had. Something particular to Hanno. *Justice*, I decided. *He needs to be undoing something he believes unjust.*

Still, what a goddamn terror of an aspect.

The Dead King apparently agreed the situation was beyond salvageable, as the Pyromancer let himself be impaled by Sidonia without batting an eye so he might finish casting a spell that shot out a small arrow of red flame. I wove Night and Hanno moved, the both of us intervening as the Grave Binder tumbled out bleeding from a shard. I pulled the villain down the ground, to his startled shout, and Hanno cut through the red arrow. It burst into small beads of red flame as it did, and while the White Knight drowned most of them in Light as I dragged away the Binder two survived. They exploded outwards, one catching the Levantine's right foot and turning it to ash in a heartbeat.

The Vagrant Spear sent the Revenant's head flying in the moment that followed, ending it.

Grim as the thought was, I could not help but think it'd hadn't been too bad a trade. The Pyromancer might have done a lot more damage if he'd been allowed to keep going. The fire shard I'd opened stopped pouring out flame as the boundary closed again, but smoke was still obscured out sight of the rest of the hall like a curtain. The four dead hadn't begun using magic again, though, which was something.

"Warden," Hanno called out. "Have we lost anyone else?"

I cocked my head to the side, turning and drawing on See.

"The Page is going in circles," I finally said, then looked forward.

My brow rose.

"And the Valiant Champion's already ahead," I said. "No one else died."

"Luck," the Grave Binder roughly said, hand aglow as he closed his rotting flesh around the foot he'd lost. "The shards ahead will-"

He was interrupted by the boundary to a shard bursting open, devils flowing out. We gathered together, the Levantine villain, hastily crawling our way, but the horde of twisted creatures flowed around us. Boundaries began popping one after another, tides of devils pouring out of them in mangled states, and even as beleaguered Named began to come out an honour guard of what looked like walin-falme formed. They bowed deep as Akua Sahelian walked out, her armour pristine, with Hierophant at her side. *She stole the devils*, I realized. She'd been caught in the same shard I did, or one similar, only she'd stolen them from the Dead King's grasp. And then she'd found Masego, using his eye to pick up more devil shards and navigate the maze to help out the others.

Of the thirteen people that had come to end the King of Death, the remaining ten now stood halfway through his hall. Only the Page was yet lost and the Champion still ahead.

"Apologies for the lateness," Akua drawled. "I was distracted by the *appallingly* bad taste in decorations."

"Also the shards trying to kill us," Masego hopefully added.

There was a moment of stupefied silence.

"See," the Forsworn Healer muttered at the Silver Huntress, "I told you it was awful. The colours of the banners clash."

I snorted.

"I don't suppose you could send your little friends forward to clear us a way?" I asked.

"I'm sure something can be arranged, darling," Akua smiled.

She idly waved and the chittering tide burst forth, flowing into the shards. I cracked the side of my neck.

"All right," I said. "Forsworn, can you do something about the Grave Binder's foot?"

The man eyed the missing limb carefully.

"I can," he said. "There is still ash on the ground."

"Good," I grunted. "The rest of us will pair up and go forward together."

I glanced at Akua. Much as I disliked admitting it, Masego was the most fitting partner for her going forward. As long as she had his glass eye, she could guide her devils through the shards to some degree.

"White Knight," I said, "you're with me. The rest of you decide on your pairs yourselves, and do it quick."

I caught Hanno's eye and he nodded. Even as the smoke began to clear, the two of us slipped past the boundary of the shard I'd picked out: the one that should lead us towards the Valiant Champion. Devils had gone ahead of us, but when we passed we found them floating impotently. I realized after a heartbeat that not only were we weightless but there was no *air* in here. Hanno kicked off the side of the sphere, looking to get through, as the both of us held our breaths. It was too large a shard, though, I thought. Fortunately, there was something at hand for me to use. Night answered my will, thin tendrils of it shooting out to pierce through the devils that Akua's will kept from resitting.

Not all of them had lungs, but most of them had bellies and that was enough. I sucked the air out of them, bringing it to my mouth with another tendril and offering the same to Hanno. Though grimacing in distaste he accepted, and I used that same tendril to let him drag me to the other side with his momentum. He waited for me there and we crossed together into *pain*. He formed a shield of Light but my limbs were still trembling from the lightning that's truck me. Fuck. If I hadn't become the Warden, that would have had me down for the count. Even with my Name I could feel pain lighting up my every nerve. When the whiteness left my eye I saw we were in little more than a tube filled with lightning, which at least made it easy to reach the boundary. His armour was smoking again, but otherwise he looked rather unfairly fine.

It was easier with his help, even though unlike others we'd gotten ahead of the devils. The defence had not been built with two Named in mind, designed to isolate and stagger us. Akua had, with her devil trick, upended the Dead King's entire defensive strategy. We went through a shard that was a sphere full of blades and spinning – into my shadow they went – and then through another that appeared to be a pit where we endless fell but Hanno revealed through Light to be a ring of warped space simply pretending to be the same. From that we crossed into a box of crushing gravity, the closest either of us came to dying, but Name strength was narrowly enough to let us reach the other side crawling on our bellies.

I ripped my way through, landing on stone tiles as my bloody chin bruised, and barely had the time to see the ray of rippling frost



burst my way. I rolled hastily to the side, knocking my staff onto the floor so Night would ripple out and disrupt the spell before it could hit me. It still iced the floor to my side and I slipped as I got up, landing on my knees and gathering the Mantle of Woe onto me just before the curse hit my chest. The magic slid off and I rolled to the side before the returning frost could catch me, rising to my feet even as Hanno crossed out of the shard. We were, I saw with mute surprise, near the bottom of the Dead King's dais. The Hidden Horror still sat his throne, watching us with something like boredom, but the Valiant Champion had already engaged what looked like his last line of defence.

She was wrestling with a massive silhouette that I thought, for a moment, to be the Prince of Bones. The shape... and yet it was not a Revenant, I realized. Stronger and larger than undead should be, but... it had not been Named while alive, and though it had the hint of it now it was because of the power burning inside it. I could see it clearly now, what I'd glimpsed in the Pyromancer. **Reign**, that was the aspect. Kingship over death, over undead. And as the word sunk into me I saw the depth of it, what it meant. For a heartbeat Neshamah disappeared, turned into nothing more than a vague shape by the sheer number of strings that came out of him. Every single one binding him to undead, reigning over them.

A kingdom of one.

Someone uncorked a flask next to me and I stiffened, just in time for the Intercessor to offer me a grin.

"The third one's the real trouble," she told me. "Also, you should duck."

I threw myself to the side, for my instincts had been agreeing with her, and red lightning poured through where I'd just standing as I landed in a painful roll. The Bard was already gone, naturally. Out of my Name trance, I actually took in the full lay of the opposition. The four mage bodies from earlier were there and there was a second hulking silhouette resembling the Prince of Bones, which Hanno had engaged before it could flank the Valiant Champion. All the mages but one were looking my way, which wasn't a bad situation. If we could keep this up until the other started crossing, our odds weren't too bad. Mind you, the Dead King had yet to take the field himself. He knew, as I did, that he'd never be more powerful against us than in the moment he got up from that throne. It was to his advantage to delay that as long as possible.

"All right," I called out at the mages, rolling my shoulder as I drew deep on Night. "Let's see what you've got."

I wove Night and they came for my life. It was simple sorcery, what they used. The kind that every undead mage I'd faced in this

war used – only brought to its pinnacle. The Dead King wielded them like a master painter playing with coloured chalk, a man at the pinnacle of his trade having a lark with children's toys. Red lightning curved as I tore through it with sickles of raw Night, looping and darting at me from every direction. I turned frost to steam only for it to explode in cutting shards, unwove curses only to find that like poisonous flowers blooming they every part turned out to have teeth. I gave ground, often and quickly, as the three dead mages methodically cornered me.

Red lightning turned into a spear blew a hole straight through the Mantle of Woe, hitting the side of my leg, but even as I fell and screamed the Skinchanger and the Vagrant Spear burst out of thin air along with a tide of devils. I felt the weight of **Reign** shift as I killed the pain in my body with a twist of Night, and in a heartbeat the devils changed sides again. The Skinchanger turned into some sort of large pale cat, leaping out of the way, and Sidonia's spear lit up again as she was forced to tear into her allies. I backed way, swallowing a burst of lightning into a circle of Night, and greased the floor under the devils to nudge thing the Vagrant Spear's way.

Her footing remained flawless even as they began falling, turning the struggle into a one-sided massacre.

The tide was turning again, I thought. Curses flew again, this time after Sidonia, but I stuck close to her and slammed burst of raw Night into the Dead King's elegant work. On the other side I saw the Champion's axe carve through one of the massive undead's arm, Hanno covering her side from the other. A heartbeat later the Skinchanger landed on the foe's back, turning into some kind of black tentacled creature that entangled its limbs. With a swell of triumph I saw the Silver Huntress and the Forsworn Healer cross, raising my staff to turn to shatter the lance of frost thrown their way. It exploded in shards that my lance of Night sucked in – I'd not fall for that trick twice – but then from the corner of my eye I caught something.

The Dead King was rising from his throne.

I went still in utter surprise. It made no sense, neither the Severance nor the Fetters were here yet and-

"Turn to dust," the King of Death ordered in Ashkaran, voice ringing out as he flicked his wrist.

The Forsworn Healer did. The spell had been little more than a grey sphere, and the moment it touched the hero he collapsed into flakes of dust.

"Honour to the Blood," the Vagrant Spear shouted, tone gone hot with fury, and she leapt.

I stood numb for half a heartbeat more, uncomprehending at how badly I'd somehow miscalculated – or he had. I might well have gotten my ribs crushed by a battering ram of rippling kinetic might had Masego not burst into sigh and wrested away the spell, smashing it back into the undead mage's face and sending him flying. I drew on Night, sword in hand and running forward as Hanno abandoned Rafaella to face the two great dead alone – she was smashed to the ground but I saw nothing more – even as Sidonia leapt at the Dead King with her spear high. He caught her by the throat, effortlessly crushing it, but she appeared in a flicker behind him and-

And red lightning caught her in the side, just in time for the Mirror Knight to come out of a shard and catch sight of it.

He let out a hoarse scream even as the Grave Binder pushed him forward, rushing forward. Fuck, I thought. If he got himself killed... No, we had an opening. Hakram had once told me Christophe and Sidonia had some odd thing going on, and she'd just been hurt at the Dead King's hand without dying. He'd gotten up too early, too, and while more of us would die we could *win* this. He'd made a mistake, I told myself, even as a voice in the back of my mind reminded me that when a skilled enemy made an obvious mistake it was no such thing. Still I charged forward, ducking under a spike of ice and carving through the mage that did it as I kept running.

The Dead King didn't even bother to turn towards Sidonia, who was still wreathed in lightning, and instead he pointed a finger at Christopher. A thin, pale filament shot out. Roaring, the Mirror Knight kept on charging at the Hidden Horror with his shield raised but it was not him the spell had been aimed at. The filament punctured the Grave Binder's neck, sinking entirely into the flesh, and a heartbeat later he collapsed into a thousand small cubes of rotten flesh. I heard Akua shout and a shield erupted between the lightning and the Vagrant Spear even as Hanno and I went for Neshamah's sides.

I struck at a translucent shield, shattering it, even as the White Knight did the same – only for him to be grabbed by the neck and tossed to the side, while I struck at the Dead King's chest with my staff and slithered Night into his body.

"Arrogance," Neshamah chided.

The Night tore back out, striking me in the face and tossing me on my back. It'd turned *cutting*, somehow, tearing up my skin and ripping the eye cloth off my dead eye. I got back up in time to see three things happen in quick succession: the Mirror Knight unsheathes the Severance and strike in a choppy gesture, the Silver Huntress loose a Light-wreathed arrow and the Vagrant Spear strike at the Dead King's back. My heart leapt to my throat as the spear took him in the back of the knee and the arrow went

through his hand, shattering the spell that'd formed there. The Severance shone, its swing perfectly arced toward the Dead King's neck as I met his eyes.

They were calm, considering. Not afraid in the slightest.

Right before the Saint of Sword's conviction made into a blade caught his neck, he turned and touched Sidonia's forehead with two fingers. Her own skull compressed, crushing her head from the inside, and she died even as the Severance took the Dead King's head. It went tumbling to the ground, the body collapsing, and surprised triumph stole all our breaths. Except I knew better, deep down. The dead hadn't stopped moving, and as Akua matched a burst of red lightning aimed at me with a pale mirror I watched the Dead King's twice-corpse twitch. The world shivered as Hierophant Witnessed the truth of it, but a wind blew from behind as something passed us by. Dimly I felt the shards of Arcadia being drawn between us the dais where Neshamah's remains were writhing, but that was not what drew my eye. The Dead King's last aspect was burning, lighting up to my own like a bonfire in the night.

**Return**, the Dead King laughed, and he did.

I closed my eye, realizing then what it was that the Hidden Horror was. Not just what Neshamah Be-Iakim had been when he became undead, but the story he had since become. A maker of armies and Revenants, he how Raised the dead. The sovereign of the Kingdom of the Dead, he who Reigned over death. And finally the unending menace that had been seared into the memory of Calernia, the great doom that would Return no matter how many crusades battered its gates. He wouldn't die, I grasped, because deep down most of Calernia didn't believe that he could. It wouldn't be that simple, in practice, there would be weaknesses and nuances.

But that was the story at the heart of it, and a story was a powerful thing.

When I opened my eye, we stood at the beginning of the hall again and the Dead King sat on his throne, a dead sparrow on his hand. The shards had pushed us back, returned us where we'd begun. Of the thirteen who had come to this last hall, now eight stood dazed around me. The Page, who had never left the shard where he was imprisoned, remained there.

"I don't understand," Christophe said, voice anguished. "You told me it would *kill* him."

He was looking down at the sword in his hand, the Severance laid bare. The sword was wavy to my eye, as if it cut the very air around it.

"Why does he still live?" the Mirror Knight demanded, eyes going to me. *"What did Sidonia die for?"*

And I didn't have the answer, but someone else did. My eye went to him.

"Hierophant?"

Masego stood there, frowning, and I had to clear my throat before he returned to us.

"The Severance did what it was meant to," Hierophant said. "It cut both his body and his soul."

"Then why did he not end?" Hanno asked.

"His soul did not disperse or move on to the otherworld," Masego said, "because it is otherwise bound."

Akua's twitch betrayed her surprise.

"He has made a phylactery," she said. "A soul receptacle."

My fingers clenched.

"His throne?" the White Knight asked.

"No," I murmured. "That's not the kind of man we're dealing with."

"Keter," Hierophant said.

"Where in Keter, Masego?" the Silver Huntress patiently asked.

I felt my stomach drop.

"Keter is where, isn't it?" I quietly asked. "It's the entire fucking city."

He nodded.

"After all," Masego said, "it is the Crown of the Dead. The name was more fitting than we ever knew."

"So he keep coming back until we destroy city," the Valiant Champion said.

Another nod.

"Then what does the Severance even do?" the Mirror Knight harshly said.

"It destroyed him," Hierophant informed him. "You did sufficient damage to disperse his soul. Only instead of moving on his soul remained bound to its anchor, and then something-"

"An aspect," I elaborated. "Return."

"An aspect," Hierophant adjusted, "ensured that it formed anew. The scar the Severance left is still there, the damage done was permanent."

"So the only way to destroy him is to destroy every single fragment of his soul with the Severance," the White Knight evenly said.

Which, he did not need to say, did not seem in the cards. Not only did we need to get to him through the shards again, but we were fewer, wounded and tired. And it occurred to me, in that moment, that he had risen from his throne the very moment the Forsworn Healer reached him. Immediately, without hesitation, and that his first blow had been aimed at the man.

The Dead King had never stopped fighting his war of attrition.

"We don't have the time for that," I said. "Even if we could, our armies will break first."

My eye slid to Akua.

"It will have to be the Fetters," I said.

Hanno grimaced, but did not argue. He knew as well as I did that we were out of options. I'd ordered Akua to tell them all of the Fetters on their way up, knowing it might come in necessary, and was now glad I had.

"I will take the other end," the White Knight said, volunteering for an eternity without hesitation. "Who will shackle him with the other?"

"Let me," Christophe de Pavanie quietly said.

Hanno blinked at him.

"Perhaps someone faster on their-"

"Let me hold up the other end of the leash," the Mirror Knight cut through. "Enduring, Hanno, has been my sole virtue from the start. Let me make something worthy of it."

The White Knight's face closed, as he hesitated, so Christophe sought my eye instead. I was, after all the Warden. I studied his face, the grief still on it, and decided that though grief over Sidonia had formed the decision it was not the sum whole of it. It was the consequence of the man he'd become, the one I had spoken with in the shadow of Keter before the end of this war began. And that man was, for better or worse, someone I would trust with imprisoning the Dead King.

"Give him the Fetter," I said. "I'll hold the other."

Hanno began to argue but I held up my hand. There was no argument to be had. That was the nature of sacrifice, wasn't it? Selfless and selfish all at once.

"Thank you," the Mirror Knight quietly said, meeting my eye.

"There are things for which I deserve thanks, Christophe," I replied quietly, "but this is not one of them."

I turned away when Akua pressed the ring of bronze and copper into my hand, pretty piece of torment that it was. She was looking at me, I thought, like she'd never seen me before. *Did you think I would force it on you?* I thought. *It wouldn't mean anything, if it wasn't your choice.* In the end she said nothing, leave me to give Christophe the second Fetter. I breathed out.

"We cross again," I said. "Prepare yourselves."

"It will not be the same," Hierophant warned. "He blended the shards before putting them back into place. There are fewer but they have grown in danger."

"Danger's our trade," I replied. "And he's not the only one with surprises left."

I sent Hanno to fetch the Page alone, but the rest of us went in pairs again. I took the Skinchanger with me, accepting her suggestion that I should carry her as a mouse. It was lethal from the start, with the first shard we stepped into a blend of the falling water and the lightning tube. If I'd not still had water from the first go we might well have died electrocuted, but crashing water on water bought us just long enough to crush. In my haste, though, I did not notice that the crossing separated us. I had no idea where she ended up, but I'd stumbled into a pitch black furnace. The fire was not difficult to deal with, simply requiring that I wreath myself in a coat of Night, but the darkness was.

Last time I'd used the Dead King as my compass, but this time he felt obscured to my eye. I found it difficult to See him, as of something was obscuring my sight. I'd have to wait for another Named to get ahead of me before I could figured out which way to go.

It was only inevitable, I supposed, that she'd come back then.

"Told you the third was the trouble," the Intercessor said. "Did you really think you lot were the first to ever get to him? Please, I nudged three crusades that way before giving it up as a lost cause."

The first dark shard had been a void where I could not even speak, but this one was different. It had been blended with a shard of fire, and so needed to be able to burn – the threat had changed from simply being lost or being on fire to my running out of strength in Night as I waited out both. It did mean, though, that now I could speak.

"I know what you're after," I sneered. "We've figured it out. Judgement gone silent and the ealamal just *waiting* for that hour of need. I know you're trying to make us lose, Yara."

I heard her drink from the flask, not just a small mouthful but a long swallow.

"That's *one* of the things I'm trying to do, Catherine," the Bard said. "It's not that I really want to kill everyone, you know, it's that they gave me no other choice. Except, of course, you taking my place."

"That failed in the Arsenal," I said. "You're too late."

"No," the Intercessor quietly laughed, "I don't think I am. You still have an aspect left undefined, and most importantly you have a crucible."

I rolled my eye.

"I've known a few of those in my time," I said.

"No," she said. "You haven't. Not the kind you need to become me. Do you want to know what it took, to become?"

I actually did, I found to my own distaste. It was information too valuable to be turned aside, even if she was likely to be playing me.

"What?" I asked, giving her what she wanted.

"The impossible," the Intercessor said. "You have to do the impossible, even if only the once."

I opened my mouth to answer but she tutted me.

"No," she said, "you haven't. You've done the improbable, and admittedly with some skill, but not the *impossible*. You haven't broken fundamental rules to win."

"And you have?" I asked.

She ruefully laughed.

"Creation was easier back then," the Intercessor said. "There were fewer of us, more unseen spaces to work in. I'm not sure I'd be able to pull it off now, but I did when I was young."



She drank, and after I could hear her smile.

"I convinced Creation that I was made of stories," the Wandering Bard told me. "That I could wield them, shape them, live through them."

"How?"

"First I made myself into a song," she said. "Then I made myself into a story. Then I tricked gods into singing one and telling the other."

She sounded almost fond.

"Of course, then I got exactly what I asked for," the Intercessor. "Thought I'd gotten the better of the Gods, for the first few centuries."

She laughed, and it was bitter enough I could almost taste it.

"Then a few centuries more passed, and I got who that joke was really on," Yara of Nowhere said. "It's never them, Catherine. If you learn anything from me, learn that."

"And you think I can do the same as you?" I frowned. "Trick gods?"

"Gods no," the Intercessor snorted. "You're a blunt fucking instrument, child, even when you're being subtle. But you *can* do the impossible, the table's set for it."

When she spoke again she felt close, as if whispering straight into my ear.

"You can't beat him," Yara said. "The pieces aren't there, Catherine. But if you beat him, anyway, well..."

"Then I take your place," I finished.

"Good odds you do," the Intercessor jovially. "It'll be a fucking forever of a curse, but then you're a pretty terrible person. And if you fail, well, I still get my way. Cordelia will do what Lycaonese do and I still get to put it down."

*I convinced Creation I was made of stories*, she'd told me.

"You're not just getting rid of people who know of you," I quietly said. "You're trying to kill everyone on Calernia. No more stories, no more you."

It was how she got out of the cage she'd made for herself.

"Not everyone, Cat," she chided me. "It's still Judgement doing it, after all. I'll just make their standards stringent enough

that, say, maybe forty people on the continent are able to meet them. That'll do the trick. In a few decades people will die out soft, and I can spare a few decades."

I felt her smile again.

"Those go by," she softly said, "in the blink of an eye."

Ahead of me, I Saw another Named pull ahead. I had my path through.

"You won't beat him with that thing Sahelian's cobbled together, whatever it does," Yara told me. "It won't stick through a death, Catherine, and that's his favourite trick: he'll die to get out, if he has to."

I'd been about to walk through the fire, but I paused at that. It made, I realized, a horrible amount of sense. The Autumn Crown had been supposed to make the Dead King indestructible in exchange for undoing his mastery of the dead, but the Fetters were a simpler creation. If the Dead King let himself die after he was bound in them, could he slip the noose? The Fetters would be closed around his soul, and his soul could be carved up and dispersed. Christophe had already done it one today, it just hadn't stuck. It wouldn't stick, I suspected, even if there was not so much as a speck of intelligence left in that scarred up soul. He'd just come back mindless and hungry until the soul was utterly destroyed.

There was a decent chance, I realized, that even our most desperate plan *wouldn't work*.

"There it is," the Intercessor murmured, sounding pleased. "You see the wall, the impossible. Now you just have to find the determination to *break it*."

"What do you want of me, Yara?" I spoke through clenched teeth.

And I knew the danger, I did, so I touched the Night for the slightest bit. Set a weave to unmake.

"You're the Warden," she said. "Not as catchy as-" and there she said a word in a language I had never heard, "but we can work with that. You're still a user of stories, of Names. So use them to win."

A hand touched my shoulder and I let her, closing my eye to See what she wanted to show me. Her own glimpse of Creation. It was not objects in motions, chords and stories and the lay of possibilities. It was, I decided, like a living tapestry. All interwoven and ever-moving. But she wasn't looking at the whole of it, only at the small part that was here and now. Today, in

this spire, facing the Dead King. The Named that had pulled ahead of me, heading for their foe.

"That's what we're working with," Yara said. "That set of stories. Some are unfinished, and those tend to be the most useful, but we're not going to win this with a third aspect or the Page transitioning. It's fucking Neshamah, he's been the collective nightmare of Calernia for longer than we've been pissing in pots. Your winner is here."

Grey thread in the tapestry, I saw, not empty but that she could not see. Not yet come into colour.

"Akua," I said.

"That's your victory right there," the Intercessor agreed. "She's got weight in spades and personal ties to you on top of it. It always works best when it costs something, yeah? Nudge our girl into the right Name at the right moment and you can, just for that one fucking moment, do the impossible."

"You can't control what Name people get," I flatly said.

"Maybe not out there, but in here?" Yara smiled. "Hells, you've got her all ready for a dozen redemption stories and all the other moving parts in here are Named. *This is your board, Catherine.* You just have to sit down and play."

And the thing was that, even now that her own vision was fading I could See what she meant. Akua wasn't one of the stars, she was not Named, but I could feel a course of stories she might come into. And the others, well, the practicals of their fights against Neshamah might be beyond me to predict but they didn't really matter. I looked at them going through the shards and it was the simplest thing in the world to reach out. The White Knight was having trouble reaching the Page, so I gave them a little nudge. Flicked the Page's aspect of **Incise**, making him remember there was more to it than combat. It was sharpness and precision, not killing, and those applied to more than just fighting.

He cut into the darkness, enough for Hanno to see, and Light followed.

Now the Silver Huntress was going to charge ahead, because she had always envied Archer and now Archer had become the Ranger. So one nudge to hurry to the left instead of the right and she stumbled into an airless shard of powerful gravity, the Mirror Knight hurrying behind her and falling. He hit the bottom of the shard with the weight of years of accumulated **Dawn**, blowing right through. They fell into a shard of devils and blind rage, but they were right next to Hierophant and he tore open the boundary with the shard he shared with Akua. The devils flooded into the

frost, dying in moments, and in his rage the Mirror Knight shattered the walls both shards.

They all made it to the middle of the room, much sooner than they should have.

"That's the push and the pull," Yara said approvingly. "It's the fundamentals of the game, how you get people moving. You're going to need a little more than that, if you want to shape stories."

I hummed, because she was right. The Valiant Champion, I Saw, carried with her a great guilt. She had too often been the last one standing, and she treasured the White Knight all the more for being one of the rare survivors of bands she had joined. She wanted to be the first into danger, so it wouldn't be others paying the price, and that was easy enough to arrange. She was already behind the four who'd reached the centre of the room and gone on ahead towards the Dead King, so she'd hurry after them. That would drive her to take risks, enough she came through first again. Then someone... mhm, it'd have to be heroine she wouldn't care for anyone remotely villainous. The Silver Huntress would do.

A nudge that got the Silver Huntress wounded by one of the dead mages would do the trick, pushing her to use her domain and wiped out all of the Dead King's defences in one swoop. It would open space for the Mirror Knight to strike, and... what if she died instead of got wounded though? Oh, the Champion would go after the Dead King directly then. Better results, he wouldn't be able to pull some trick I wasn't able to see that fucked everyone over and the defences still got wiped by the others while the Dead King was stuck in the domain. Probably worth the Silver Huntress, since she was the likeliest to die of the Dead King got to pull his trick.

"You might need a third go," Yara noted, having followed every nudge. "Focus on getting Sahelian there and damage his defences. You only need the one miracle, everything else is about getting it there."

And it sounded cruel, I thought, but it was true. Hadn't it been what this entire battle was about? Thousands were dying out there in the inner city so that a handful of people in here could slay the Dead King and end it. If I was cruel, it was because I played a cruel game. And what was the life of a handful of people, against all of Calernia? I'd known the answer to that at sixteen, and the years had done nothing to change it.

"The White Knight's a dead end," I muttered with a frown. "I can't even use him properly."

"**Save**'s a real bitch," Yara sympathetically said. "Tariq used to pull the same shit by asking Mercy for tips, though at least I

could get around that. Your boy's a lot more of pain to deal with."

In most stories he sacrificed himself for others, stepping in to save them if they got nudged into a path that got them killed. It was like he was pathologically incapable of seeing the larger picture. The Mirror Knight, at least, could be relied on to go in a blaze of glory to avenge the Vagrant Spear. That'd turned out to be a fortunate death, leverage-wise. I watched as Silver Huntress and the Mirror Knight reached the Dead King first, beginning the fight as he sat his throne. They wouldn't be enough.

"I can't get to Akua," I finally said. "Not strong enough."

Even if I stepped in myself, it wasn't enough to nudge her into a name. Love was not enough. It had to be her decision and I didn't have a good enough angle to move that.

"Yes you can," Yara whispered into my ear. "You're not looking at all the angles, Catherine. When a nudge isn't enough sometimes you have to **Guide** things down the right path."

And oh, it was so very simple when finally my eyes were open. See hadn't been enough, it could only observe. To be able to **Guide**, though, as Yara could? That was looking at the endings of a story and choosing the one that would happen. It seemed a little thing and it was, it really was, when you thought only of a single story. But when it was five, twenty, a hundred? Then it was like being able to forge your own puzzle pieces. Silver Huntress died trying to be what she wanted Ranger to be and Archer to admire, which led into the Valiant Champion containing the Dead King. The rest of the board was cleared and then, when she died and he came back, the Page tried to transition and died if the White Knight didn't get in the way, which he would. Leaving who the Dead King really wanted to kill, the Hierophant, wide open. Akua would be too slow and not forgive herself.

So she'd reach for something beyond her, a Name, and that I could **Guide** into what I needed.

She would destroy him. We would. It would all be over.

"It's not my aspect, though," I murmured.

"Hierophant's right," Yara assured me. "The godhead's just a trick of perspective. Use mine for a bit and you'll pick it up."

"They both die," I finally said. "Almost all of them do."

"And that's a tragedy," she agreed. "It's always a tragedy, Catherine. No matter how tired you get, that doesn't change. There's always a William to make you weep. But if you don't play

the games, if you don't get your hands in the red, then how many more die?"

She squeezed my shoulder comfortingly.

"You always got that part," Yara said. "That the deaths don't matter more because they matter to you. You'll get to keep that, I think. It'll make you better than I was in some ways."

"Because I can do what needs to be done," I quietly said.

I felt her nod. And she was right, I knew. What a paltry fucking cost the handful of people in this spire were, if it kept the rest of Calernia breathing. The easiest of bargains. And maybe it'd wound me, but my life had been a collection of wounds. What was one more? I was a villain, in the end.

Mine was not the fate of happy endings.

I breathed out and watched it in my mind's eye, measuring angle and timing. It would be close, but Yara was wrong. I wouldn't need a third go, just slightly bloodier hand. It would just need to- the weave undid itself and pain returned to my body. My leg, my bad leg throbbed with pain.

*Do not forget*, it whispered. *That this is not a game. That you make mistakes.*

I wanted to argue, to struggle, but the pain took my breath away.

*Do not forget*, it whispered, *that there must be more than ruin.*

"Catherine?" the Intercessor slowly said.

I shook off her hand.

"If you'd said I needed to kill Akua, I might have believed you," I quietly said. "But Masego, Yara? *Masego?*"

The one who'd never left me, never asked anything of me. The one who'd promised to stay by my side when this all ended, even as everybody left. The one who'd forgiven me for killing my father.

"They say we only get one choice that matters," I told her. "And maybe that's true. So here's my choice: *I will not be a crab in your fucking bucket.*"

She was gone in an instant, and as I stepped out of the shard I breathed Creation's air once more. A pivot, I thought. It had been a pivot. The others were fighting the Dead King, I Saw, and they were losing. I watched it unfold, the desperate gamble. Alexis wounded and the Valiant Champion using her domain to whisk away the dead defending Neshamah. I passed through another shard, barely feeling the swirling acid as it roiled against a wreath of

Night. Then the Dead King revealed why it was he had slain the Grave Binder, calling on Revenants buried beneath the tiles bearing their names. They tore through, swarming my companions. Neshamah had, as always played it so very careful.

He'd gotten rid of the healer to ensure our wounded would not return. He'd slain Sidonia so that love could not be turned against him twice. And then he'd killed the Grave Binder so that no one could hinder his raising of Revenants.

Only, I thought as I stepped through a swarm of poisonous insects that multiplied by the moment, he had made a mistake. Because Return wasn't perfect, he'd showed me that. He needed his anchor it was why he'd done a grand gesture like making all of Keter his phylactery. The Mirror Knight had killed him one today and if the anchor hadn't made sure that his soul stayed in Creation, that it didn't disperse, then the Severance's cut would have been the end of him. Return wasn't an absolute, because no matter how powerful a story there was always a weakness. And I'd learned his, I realized, entirely by accident. Years ago, in a fight that had nothing to do with him at all.

See, I'd once wanted to steal Akua Sahelian's soul to get around an oath not to shed her blood but she'd already taken it out and put it in a phylactery. Masego had called it a manner of lichdom, back then, and been mightily impressed. He was not someone easily impressed, which had gotten me curious. What was it that Akua had done that was so unusual? A real lich was undead, I'd learned. That seemed a small detail but was why they were able to take out their soul and why Akua's trick of taking it out while she lived was such an achievement: the soul was removed during the ritual that turned the mage into a lich. The Dead King, then had removed his soul when he became undead through the ritual that destroyed Sephirah when he effectively died.

So if his death was undone, it'd *come back*.

When I crossed the last shard, striding through entropy that stole another meaningless decade from me, I came out onto a scene of triumph. And not ours.

The Valiant Champion was on her knees, most of her torso turned into bone. The Silver Huntress' bow had been snapped and she was losing a fight with a Revenant spearman, giving ground, while the Skinchanger had turned into a spotted cat to avoid the howling sorcery of a robed mage. The Mirror Knight was being sat on by a massive distorted Revenant bearing a crow's mask, though the undead's attempts to break Christophe's neck were running into the issue of the neck being harder than the behemoth's gauntleted fists. The White Knight was fighting half a dozen Revenant swordsmen and holding, but he was not winning. The Page was doing the best of us all, savaging what looked like an Arlesite duellist dripping with gold suns.

Akua and Masego were locked in a struggle of raw power with the Dead King, sorcery against sorcery, and they were *losing*.

I breathed out, sharpening my mind as I pulled on Night and stepped forward. The Dead King laughed, seeming genuinely delighted. There was a ripple and the two Soninke mages were blown away, sent flying, as the King of Death turned to me.

"I knew you would not fall for her tricks," Neshamah smiled. "You lack the perspective, Warden, but you still understand the essence of it. *We are all prisoners.*"

I'd heard this before, I thought, from Masego. Who'd been raised in a shard of Arcadia as a boy and seen it end, wondering then how long it would take until the Gods did the same to Creation. The Game of the Gods would have an end, after all. Someone had to win.

"And you want to get out before Last Dusk," I said.

"When the Gods end it all, Catherine Foundling," Neshamah Be-Iakim said, "when the last soul passes and the last of Creation is unmade, then I will stride alone into a sky of cold and distant stars."

He leaned forward.

"And in that empty void between worlds, moving to no purpose but mine, I will at last know the taste of freedom."

And he meant it, I knew with ironclad certainty. Every word of that. All he'd ever wanted was to get out. And maybe part of what he'd become was on Yara of Nowhere, who had hounded on behalf of the masters he wanted to rid himself of, but it wasn't on her head alone. He was still the same man who had destroyed Sephirah for his madness, who had taken a sickle to Calernia through the millennia as a reaper of lives. He was not excused. He was the face of everything I wanted the Liesse Accords to kill, the black madness that broke nations and swallowed whole cities. A single man whose lunacy was enough to break the world.

And Gods, hadn't we all had enough of that?

"From them," I said. "You'll be free from them, Neshamah. But you forget that you are yet in the pit with the rest of us. And down here, we are all mud."

"Am I to monologue for you, Warden?" he smiled. "I will not snatch defeat from the jaws of victory."

It was a gesture of respect, I grasped, when he called me respect. For my Role, for how far I had come. He had meant it when he called me a peer.



"You don't need to," I said. "You've already given me enough."

"It would be worse to kill me, you know," Neshamah idly said. "I have prepared for it."

"You'd make it worse," I acknowledged.

I'd long seen it coming. He seemed, I noted, a little cheated by how easily I accepted that.

"You have seen the shape of my sovereignty," the Dead King said.

"I have," I agreed.

A million strings, a million dead, all to make a kingdom of one.

"Should I end," the Hidden Horror said, "it will pass to another. One Creation should fear even more than I."

It took me a moment to understand what he meant. When I did, I almost refused to believe it.

"Weeping Heavens," I said. "You don't even control the drakon when it's just a drop of essence. You'd give all you hold?"

"I had a friend once," he smiled, "who was a woman of remarkable clarity. She once asked: if Creation is not mine, what need is there to be a Creation at all?"

I cocked my head to the side. I shouldn't, I knew, but in some ways I would forever be my father's daughter.

"Quoting Triumphant," I told him, "is the last refuge of the uninspired."

And I beheld him then, standing proud and unbent in the face of all Creation. The oldest of tyrants, the King of Death himself who had worn his pale crown through the millennia to war upon the world. The first and greatest of the old breed, the one they all fell short of becoming. The last relic of the Age of Wonders. And I knew, in that moment, that he was mine to judge. That I had taken on the Role, the responsibility. I was the Warden, the usherer of the Age of Order, and it fell on me to close the curtain on the times that had come before it. The Mirror Knight had once feared I would make myself a ruler over Named, and he was not so far as that. I'd always been about authority, just never about wearing a crown.

I was to be a judge.

"Neshamah Be-Iakim," I said, "you have devoured cities and shattered realms, waged war upon all the world and sown ruin wherever reached your hand. You are the high priest of desolation, the tyrant undying."

He felt it, I saw, same as I. The shiver in the air. His Role and mine, testing the other's weight. His hand

"By my Name of Warden," I said, "I **Sentence** you to die."

He came for us, then, without a speck of holding back. It came as a swarm of buzzing curses, a tide of a million deaths, but the charge of my last aspect had sunk into him. The **Sentence** would stay in him, my authority – my madness – carved into Creation. His fate was writ as death, and now the lay of world would fight to ensure it.

I had, at last, a providence of my own.

The Silver Huntress's wrist was touched by a curse and she withered to bones in a heartbeat even as I swallowed a shout of dismay. The Page exploded into ash, the Skinchanger screamed as she unravelled from the inside. I raised my staff, drawing as deep on Nigh as I ever had. It would not be enough, I knew, but so long as Hanno could – the Valiant Champion interrupted the thought, leaping forward with her axe high, and as she looked death in the face she smiled.

"**Exalt**," Rafaella of Alava said.

And then she was gone, the Dead King's great doom and his Revenants with her. In the heartbeat that followed were moving. The Mirror Knight first and swiftest, Hanno and I tearing forward even as Hierophant and Akua's magic rose.

"Hanno," I shouted.

His eyes met mine.

"Bring him back," I said. "Make him *alive*."

Three spells went flying. Masego's hit the Dead King in the chest, burning through robes and sending him stumbling back. Akua's and Neshamah's collide, one giving and a heartbeat later Akua Sahelian *screamed*. Christophe de Pavanie, smiling, dropped his shield and swung the Severance at the Dead King's neck two-handed. Bit his wrist, oh his wrist was caught. And Neshamah's other hand was laid on his neck, a curse leaving the fingertips and spreading black across the Mirror Knight's skin. He smiled still.

"**Reflect**," the Mirror Knight whispered.

And the Dead King screamed, rot spreading across his dead limbs as the Mirror Knight slumped. Breathing his last he twisted, twisting around the Severance, and handle of it fell into Hanno's outstretched hand. The one missing fingers. He caught it. I struck out, the staff of deadwood I'd ripped from Liesse after

refusing the old victories and defeats writhing with the power of the goddesses that had made me as much as I'd made them. The hit caught Neshamah in the neck, even as his magic sharpened, a pulse of Night disrupted the spell. Hanno of Arward's hand touch the Dead King's forehead, that rough workman's palm covering it.

**"Undo,"** the White Knight said.

And as Creation screamed, life roared back into the Dead King's corpse. Millennia of weight fought the White Knight's fresh aspect, an oak tree to a dandelion, but a finger had already been laid on the balance. I had Sentenced Neshamah to die, and for that he must first live. So colour flushed back into his cheeks, those pale brown eyes widening as his magic rose again. A killing spell, and end for the both of us.

**"Silence,"** I ordered, and it died.

And Hanno struck, the Severance biting into the Hidden Horror's neck for the second time that day. It cleaved through flesh and bone, red blood spurting as death followed in the wake of life. Neshamah Be-Iakim's head fell, its eyes golden in death, and the two of us stood by the dropping corpse in disbelief. Movement behind me, and I turned sword in hand but it was Hierophant – who darted forward, hand snatching a sparrow as it erupted from the Dead King's last corpse. It was, I saw with surprise, a soul. His soul.

"I told you, King of Death," Hierophant smiled, "that I would come for you."

And he bit off the sparrow's head, teeth crunching as he swallowed and began to devour the Dead King's soul, making its knowledge his own. The foundation, I knew, of a godhead to be. We'd won, I realized. We'd just killed him. And though he had threatened us with the drakon, if the Antigone came through then... A sigh sounded, and I turned to see Yara of Nowhere standing among the ruins of the highest hall of Keter.

"Why," she asked, "does it always have to be the hard way with you lot?"

## **Interlude: Legends V**

*"One: first, do good."*

*-"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown*

The wards shuddered.

The great battering rams of the dead were cracking them apart blow by blow, the beleaguered defenders conceding one barricade

after another to the horde. Swarms of undead birds flew so thick above them all that it seemed as if night had fallen, the creatures snatching up any soldier that left the protection of the sorcery and tearing them apart so that limbs rained down. How many more layers were left the wards? Cordelia was not certain, but it could not be more than a handful. Inch by inch they had given ground to the Enemy, the Dead King's tireless teeth devouring them one soldier at a time. They might just, she thought, run out of men before they ran out of ground.

She'd begun with almost two thousand, but that longer had long dwindled into the hundreds.

The princess sat with her back to the all-too-thin palisade that Hannover men had raised with calm competence, now standing behind it with halberds and hammers as the horde continued to hammer at the wards. What a small thing this length of wood was, in the face of the monsters that awaited. What would it do against a rampaging beorn or the venom of a wyrm? It might as well be parchment. And still she sat there, among the crowd of grim-faced soldiers calmly awaiting the death coming for them one bite at a time. Cordelia's gauntleted hand brushed back her mud-streaked hair, careful to avoid the cuts on her face.

She'd been offered healing, but she would not die from torn cheeks and every wasted speck of Light was a soldier the priests could not send back into the fight. Standing by her, Simon de Gorgeault looked over the top of the palisade and let out a thoughtful hum.

"Goods news, Simon?" she drily asked.

"It appears that the Dead King is a fine diplomat indeed, Your Grace," the lay brother easily replied. "I do believe I am spying the High Lady of Kahtan fighting side by side with the Prince of Orense."

It took Cordelia a moment to recall that both of them were dead, though she would have been clued in by the raucous laughter from the Hannover soldiers anyhow. It was exactly the kind of black humour they loved. A shade lighter than what Bremenites preferred, but then most Lycaonese agreed that they only laughed because they'd never learned how to cry.

"It figures," the once-First Prince mourned, "that they would only start getting along after I abdicated."

Laughter again, and though exhausted Cordelia forced herself to rise to her feet. Over the palisade she found what Simon had, a contingent of Praesi dead in colourful armour methodically levelling the broken palisades the dead had already taken so that the horsemen died in Rodrigo Trastanes' honourable last charge would be able to ride through the smoking grounds. What a small

thing a palisade was, she thought again. So easily done away with, for all that it was the only wall standing between them and death. A remembrance brushed against her mind, then, and to her surprise Cordelia found herself thinking of her mother with a faint smile.

"Good news, Your Grace?" Simon lightly echoed.

She shook her head.

"I was merely thinking," Cordelia said, "that sometimes the story you hear is not the one you are being told."

"I don't follow, I'm afraid," the lay brother said.

"When I was a girl, my mother once told me the tale of the Three Cousins," the fair-haired princess said. "Do you know of it?"

It was an old story known among all Lycaonese and even some of the northern Alamans, though the tale changed with the telling.

"I do not," Simon admitted.

It was simple, as the most beloved stories tend to be, and Cordelia remembered her mother telling it with characteristic brusqueness. It'd been her way, the choppy burst of emotions. Anger and laughter, come then gone in a moment like Hannover's capricious summer rains.

"I can tell it, if you would like," she lightly offered.

What else was there to do, as they waited for the rams to break the wards? There were no more tricks, no more walls, no more desperate gambles. Only the brutal trade of time for lives and ground. The white-haired man laughed.

"As good a time as any, I would think," he cheerfully agreed.

There were, she thought, worst men to face the end of the world with than Simon de Gorgeault.

"An old king," Cordelia said, "died without sons and daughters. His line died with him and another rose to take the seat, but laws are laws."

The lay brother rested his elbows on the edge of the palisade, resting his chin on his palm as he listened with bright eyes.

"His wealth of iron was split in three parts," Cordelia told him, "and given over to his last three kinsmen: three cousins, who went north to seek their fortunes as men do. They journeyed long, longer than men ever had before them, but in time they found a rich, green land by the banks of a great river. They decided to settle there and raise their halls."

A broad-shouldered redhead in plate down the palisade, her solid matron's face split by a smile, hummed out the first few notes of *O Blessed Hannoven* – that sardonic hymn boasting of every horror plaguing the land as if each were a blessing to thank Above for, be it spring floods or the armies of the dead. Cordelia had also picked up on the resemblance, as a child. Hannoven bordered lakes and rivers, and though far north counted some of the finest farmland in Lycaonese hands.

"Only," Cordelia said, "as they began to build, they learned too late that the river was the Last River and that on the other side of it dwelled Death."

She shrugged.

"But they no longer knew the way back, so they raised their halls anyway."

"Stubborn folk," Brother Simon said, the fond twist of his lips making it a compliment.

"The first cousin, the oldest, was a lord bold and brave," the princess said. "He built his hall in stone and fashioned his iron into a gate that none could break, raising a tall banner over it."

Cordelia has thought him the wisest when she was first told the story.

"The second cousin, the youngest, was a hunter clever and sly. He raised his hall atop a tree in the woods, hidden in leaves, and fashioned his iron into arrowheads aplenty."

There was no disdain in her tone, but it was there to be found in the faces of some who listened. Her people were a pragmatic sort, they'd had to be to survive, but they believed in honour still. There was little honour to be found in hiding in the woods as your kin perished around you, clever or not.

"The last cousin, neither young nor old, was a warrior neither bold nor clever," Cordelia smiled. "He raised his hall from wood, fashioning his iron into a sword and helm. And for a long summer and winter the three ruled over their halls, until spring came and Death with it."

In the distance the boom of the rams against the wards sounded, followed by a loud *crack*. The first fault line. It was only a matter of time now.

"The spirits of the dead came charging out of Below," she said, "a great army that laid siege to the bold cousin's stone hall. And though they were many and furious, the iron gate did not break."

But this was not a southern tale. Victories did not keep on shining like stars in the sky. They passed, as all things did.

"Yet the siege did not end," Cordelia said, "and as the moon turned the oldest of the three cousins grew hungry. Behind his strong gate he remained a prisoner, until his hunger slew him behind stone walls and he rose anew to unbar his gate of iron for Death."

Simon looked stricken, but there were grunts of approval from the soldiers around them. Most of them would know the story already, but even those that did not would approve of the lesson her mother had tried to teach her: no walls were ever strong enough to keep death out forever.

"Onwards the spirits of the dead marched, into the woods where the youngest cousin had raised his hall," she told the lay brother. "And the clever cousin laughed, for the spirits stumbled about as he remained hidden in the leaves and slew them with his arrows of iron."

There were few tricksters, in her people's stories, and she thought for good reason. Tricks meant little against the Chain of Hunger, and it was a rare trickster indeed that could get the better of the King of Death. More often, the sly got a lot of people killed trying to prove their cleverness.

"Only the dead are endless," Cordelia shrugged, "and though they could not find him they devoured the forest tree by tree. The youngest cousin killed many, but arrows always run out."

The end had been writ from the start.

"The tree was toppled, his hall with it, and he was swallowed whole."

Simon de Gorgeault's face had slowly changed from engrossed to grim. Lycaonese tales, she mused, did tend to have that effect on southerners.

"And the last?" he asked.

"The last cousin, the warrior, had no tall walls or hiding place," Cordelia said. "His hall was wood and easily torn down by a hundred hungry hands, but as they did her strode out wearing his helm and bearing his sword."

"And he fought," the lay brother quietly said.

"And he fought, neither winning nor losing, until spring turned to summer and the dead returned to Below," the blue-eyed princess said.

"So he was victorious," Simon said, sounding surprised.

He was startled by the hard laughter from the soldiers around them, but Cordelia was not.

"As the dead left, he set down his sword and helm to raise against his wooden hall," she told him. "And as he sat in it, the warmth of summer reaching his face, the last cousin knew this: Death would return with spring."

That had been the lesson her mother was trying to teach her, she'd thought as a child. You couldn't ever really beat Evil, not like in the pretty stories ending with a wedding and an endless summer's peace. You fought, until you died and someone else took your place. It was a fate that couldn't be turned back by a strong gate, couldn't be hidden from in the leaves. Either you faced Evil down or it devoured you whole.

In the distance, the wards cracked.

"A hard lesson," Simon de Gorgeault finally said, frowning as he gazed upon the dead. "Perhaps the Principate would not be facing ruin, had more of its people learned it."

She smiled.

"Years later," she told him, "I learned that it was only the way the tale was told in Hannoven."

In Rhenia, the story was about the halls. The first cousin was lazy, made a large iron crown and built a hall of river's mud. The second was clever, made an axe and a smaller crown then built his hall from the forest's wood. The third built only a pickaxe, spending all summer and winter to make his hall out of mountain stone. All fell but the last, the third cousin then using the remains of their broken halls to mend the wounds in his own. *Pride is worth nothing, the story taught. Survival belongs to those who labour for it.* In Neustria the cousins forged either a sword, a shield or armour out of their iron. The armoured cousin took up the arms from his fallen kin to survive.

In Bremen the story went the same as in Neustria, save that the dead did not retreat with summer and all three cousins died. But when Death took the fallen cousins Below to celebrate, the iron got stuck in the passageway and blocked off the dead until the got the iron was chewed through, come next spring.

"Is it so different elsewhere?" Simon asked.

"Not so much," Cordelia admitted. "But I remembered, then when it was my mother told me the tale. I was young, you see, and had just wept that she was never home."

And so Mother, brusque and blunt but never quite able to admit when she was sorry, had tried to explain why she was always out



there leading soldiers. Evil had to be fought on the field, she'd been trying to say, else it would reach their gates. She was trying to keep Cordelia safe, to buy them another spring. It hadn't been a lesson at all, just her mother giving the closest thing to an apology as she had it in her to give.

"Sometimes the story you hear," Cordelia softly repeated, "is not the one you are being told."

It'd been the failing palisades that had hooked the thought, the wrongly learned lesson that walls always failed in the face of Death, but now she wondered. Time was running out. The last word she'd had of the fighting inside Keter had been that the inner city was breached, but since then there'd been no word and the Grand Alliance camp was being overrun. Had been overrun, she admitted to herself. Most of it was in the hands of the dead now, the few remaining pockets in the hands of the living either forts built around supplies or the heavily warded Praesi grounds where hodgepodge survivors had fled to as the rest of the camp collapsed.

Cordelia Hasenbach had sworn that she would wait until the very last moment but that moment was approaching, step by step. Inevitable as the coming of spring.

It was her duty to do what must be done. The responsibility she must bear for the weight of her sins, the niggling questions of whether any of this would have happened at all, if she had not called the Tenth Crusade. If she had not made mortal wars into the affair of Above and Below, raised her hall on the shore of the Last River. And still she could not help but wonder: was it really the sword and helm she had chosen? The fight, to hold down in her hands and not fail it? It felt like an invincible gate, the certainty that she could end it all at any moment. It felt like a bowstring pulled back among the leaves, the fading mirage of victory. Was the story she was telling herself really the one she was living in?

She reached for the slip of parchment under her breastplate, fingers closing.

The wards shuddered one last time and then they broke.

—

"It's not a dragon," Sapan firmly said.

"It's got scales and wings," Arthur Foundling replied, "and it breathes fire. Sort of."

It was transparent, not like any fire he'd ever seen, and instead of burning seemed to simply disappear everything it touched. Not ideal, given that it narrowed down the Knight Errant's options in

facing the beast from the already sparse 'shield' and 'dodge' to merely 'dodge'. Which, given that the dragon kept growing, was becoming more difficult by the moment. It was a most inconsiderate sort of beast.

"It has commonalities with a dragon," Mage reluctantly conceded. "But so do a seagull and a wyvern."

"Don't those have tails with stingers?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"A seagull," Sapan slowly said, as if addressing a complete idiot. "Have you really never seen one before?"

There was a moment of stillness between them, then they both broke out laughing until they were out of breath.

"Had me going there for a moment," Arthur admitted, still wheezing.

"It'll be a few years until I can match Lord Hierophant," she told him, sounding admiring. "He can say *anything* with a straight face, it baffles even the Warden."

The levity had released something in the both of them, but not even her clutching at happier memories was enough to make up for the horror before them. Their breather was at an end and they would be returning to the nightmare, leaving their hiding place behind a broken pillar tall as a tower. His limbs fighting him, something like fear pulling the other way, the Knight Errant peeked out around the rough stone edge. The 'drakon', that breed of Evil dragon, was cruelly enjoying itself at the expense of the brave men that died failing to give it pause.

The fourth charge faltered of the hour as the armsmen in Hainaut livery broke, either fleeing or breaking ranks to try to drag back Princess Beatrice. The beast had killed her horse under her, tossing her down with broken legs, and was now popping the heads of those who came to help her with hateful glee. It left her crawling, only plucking out the lives of the most loyal as it ignored another volley from the Praesi scorpions. Packs of goblins had dragged in the engines only to find the bolts sinking into the flesh to no effect, made part of its body. Even unravellers did nothing, and though copperstone munitions had burned bright on its hide the bite had not been deep.

Useless as anything but a distraction.

Arthur's jaw clenched as he watched another soldier being pressed into the ground by a massive finger as Beatrice Volignac screamed in anguish. From the corner of his eye he saw light-footed Levantines move in with ropes and hooked swords, Tartessos slayers, but he held little hope. A flicker of movement among the

ruins caught his attention, the Affable Burglar smoothly advancing through broken stone. Towards Princess Beatrice?

"Gods help you," the Knight Errant whispered, and he meant both kinds.

They needed all the help.

"Arthur," Sapan called out.

He took it as a reminder not to stay out in the open too long and ducked back behind the stone, resting his too-warm forehead against the fallen pillar. This room, as great as the heart of the Alban Cathedral itself, felt like a boiling cauldron. It was hot and humid, in a way that licked disgustingly at your skin. The longer they stayed in here, the harder it was to think. Sapan's hand on his arm jolted him out of his thoughts. It'd not been a reminder, after all, but to call his attention to something. A young man in legionary's armour, Liessen blond hair peeking through the helm, had come to fetch them. A sergeant, by the single red stripe on his shoulder.

"Lady Antigone wants you," the sergeant told them.

They nodded back tiredly, the other man not waiting to escort them. He'd only been a messenger. The Witch of the Woods was not far, huddled with the Concocter over what looked like a makeshift alchemist's kit. Or a brewer's, really. Two small barrels, tubes of glass bubbling over an open flame and a hermetic vase. Lady Antigone had fought with the first two charges, helping them with her great spells, but after they broke retreated here to consort with the silver-haired Concocter. Arthur knew little of what they were up to, save that it was meant to destroy the elder dragon, but Sapan had been told of it in greater detail.

If they had assumed he was unlikely to understand the technicalities of alchemy and magic, they'd been entirely correct.

"We are nearly done," the masked Witch flatly told them.

"Almost," the Concocter murmured, laying a palm against the hermetic vase. "It's begun to sublimate properly."

Arthur sent a helpless glance at Sapan, who sighed.

"Lady Concocter stole a sliver of the drakon's body while it was still contained in the corpse where the Dead King imprisoned it," she told him.

"I knew *that*," the Knight Errant grunted. "But it's not in that body anymore so why would it help?"

"Because that thing is eating away at everything it touches, even us," the Concocter said, turning to meet his eye. "Except it didn't eat at the corpse it began within in the slightest."

He slowly nodded.

"So we are stealing the Dead King's work," he tried.

"I might be able to slay the drakon," the Witch plainly said, "if an artefact imbued with the property is sunk into its body."

Because otherwise it would simply be eaten, presumably, Arthur followed.

"Good news," he said, meaning it. "How are we to help?"

"I kept back the Affable Burglar because she's our only thief," the Witch said. "She will bring the artefact in the drakon. From you, Knight Errant, I need a wound."

He breathed in sharply.

"You want me to break its skin," he realized, "so that you might have an opening to push the artefact through."

A mute nod.

"It may well kill you," the Concocter frankly admitted.

"I'll do it," Arthur Foundling replied without missing a beat.

Fear tried to make his lips stiff, take back the words, but he had moved quicker. The Concocter's eerie orange eyes blinked in surprise.

"I have sent for help," the Witch of the Woods told him. "But I know not if they will come. You are our last chance."

It was either him or the Stained Sister, now that the Myrmidon guts were strewn across the gallery above their heads, and the Sister was protecting their only Named healer. Twice already the elder dragon had shattered a hall where the Stalwart Apostle plied her powers, only quick escape saving her life when a stream of transparent fire came for it.

"I am a knight of Callow, Lady Antigone," Arthur Foundling replied. "Our causes are always lost."

He shrugged.

"And still we prevail."

At his hip the Peregrine burned, and it felt like a smile.

—

A wave of undead hammered into the palisade, toppling it like a sandcastle failing in the face of the tide.

Cordelia kicked the skeletal hand that slipped through two stakes, shattering its wrist, then backed away hastily when a spear jutted out. She hacked at the wooden shaft but her angle was wrong and her sword got stuck, she and the dead on the other side pulling at each other to get free. The princess set a boot against the palisade to put her back into it, the sword suddenly ripped clear as she stumbled backwards. She went back to pressing against the stakes a heartbeat later as arrows began to fall in a ragged rain, taking a step back only when a bearded man in Reitzenberg colours raised his shields above their head. He was chewing at the inside of his cheek, eyes calm, and peeked over the palisade's edge.

"We're about to go down, I'd say," he told her in Reitz. "We move back to the next, let the mages torch everything."

Cordelia's eyes sought Simon, but he was further down helping up a soldier with an arrow sticking out of her shoulder. The lay brother could take care of himself, she decided.

"Let us go," the fair-haired princess agreed.

A heartbeat later she was blind, thrown off her feet as wooden shards exploded and one bit deep into her brow. Gritting her teeth, she scrabbled for the sword she'd dropped as the massive undead boar that'd smashed through the palisade shook off a few soldiers, carving through with its tusks. The soldier that'd shielded her was on a bed of ash and dirt, his spine bent at a straight angle. Fingers shaking, Cordelia worked off the straps of his shield and snatched it up. Undead were pouring through the breach, ghouls running on four legs and leaping at soldiers, but the thunder of hooves approaching told her who was to come. The Prince of Orense's horsemen now served the Enemy, and a way had been opened for them.

"Simon," she shouted, eyes searching. "We must—"

The older man, she saw, was on the ground. Wrestling with a ghoule, the soldier he'd been helping running away. Cordelia ran, and though she knew she should be following the other it was to the lay brother she went. With a wild scream she hacked into the back of the ghoule's head, parting flesh and bone. It took two blows before the creature scrabbled away, crawling on its belly as it twitched, and Brother Simon — his throat scratched raw and his scalp scarred — took its head with a swing right through the neck.

"Come on," Cordelia croaked, voice raw.

She offered him the pommel of her sword to drag him up, his chest brushing against the dead man's shield she now bore, and though the warmth of having kept at least one person she cared for breathing was yet in her belly when they turned it was to the sight of doom. The boar collapsed, a Hannoven spear through the brain even as the soldier who'd leapt on its back was dragged up screaming into the sky by vultures, but a beorn's great head leered over the broke palisade as it climbed over it. It was close, too close for them to be able to run in time and- and an armoured silhouette landed on the abomination's back, splitting its head open with a single blow. They leapt down even as the beorn collapsed on the palisade, landing smoothly and flicking their sword free of gore.

"Honour to the Blood," the Barrow Sword drily said, offering her a salute.

Cordelia recovered from her surprise first, blessed by extensive diplomatic experience in pretending nothing ever took her aback.

"Lord Ishaq," she greeted him. "My thanks. If I may request that you escort us to-"

He raised a hand to interrupt her, which was highly rude but she'd allow to pass without comment given the present circumstances.

"There is cavalry coming, Barrow Sword," Brother Simon bluntly said.

"Give it about three more heartbeats and," the villain began, then trailed off.

He was off one heartbeat, Cordelia pettily noted even as the sky lit up. A great pillar of burning Light tore through the clouds, smashing into the ground so powerfully it shook. A wind laden with the smell of burned flesh and molten metal washed over them, poisonously warm.

"There was cavalry coming, priest," Ishaq Deathless grinned through his beard.

He had, Cordelia thought, never more looked like one of the Damned. She mastered her discomfort.

"That was the work of the Blessed Artificer, I take it?" she calmly asked.

The Barrow Sword nodded.

"The Hierophant got to blow up a maze, the way we hear it, so I believe she's getting a mite competitive," he said.

Even with the relief that the column of Light had earned them the dead were continuing to pour through breaches and more than half the palisade was now on the ground, being trampled over. Soldiers were already retreating to the safety of the next layer of wards, the thin last shells, and by unspoken accord the three of them began a retreat that way as well.

"Is she coming our way?" Brother Simon asked, sounding worried. "I understand she was wounded yesterday, and to fight alone through such a horde..."

Cordelia shared his fear but chose to look upon the hope instead. If Adanna of Smyrna joined their defence, a rout may yet be avoided. The faint yellow glow in the air above them told her that the ward keeping the vultures from falling upon them was still mostly standing, but there was precious little else left. The last two palisades had boundary wards that would keep the dead from passing them, but weaker ones than those that had already been cracked. They would collapse before a quarter hour had passed, if the black stone rams were brought to bear against them. Should the Blessed Artificer bring down a wall of Light, however?

Oh, they might yet hold.

"Arrangements were made, priest, worry not," the Barrow Sword said. "Besides, you do not yet stand alone."

"Your presence is a relief," Cordelia assured him.

"As it should be," Ishaq Deathless laughed, "but it is not me I speak of. Your plight did not go unseen, Cordelia Hasenbach. Help has come."

And as if summoned by his words – perhaps not 'if', should Catherine be believed – a wave of suffocating power washed over them all. The ground shook beneath their feet and Cordelia would have fallen had Simon not gallantly caught her elbow. She steadied and turned in time to see the ground below the broken palisade rise, the earth itself rising into a rough wall. Stunned, she followed the Barrow Sword as he made for the wall cutting through a few remaining ghouls and climbed up the slope, shield hanging limp on her wrist. Up there, standing tall, she saw them coming.

There could not have been more than three hundred of the Gigantes, and yet they marched through a sea of undead as if taking a stroll.

Skeletons raised arms only to find their skulls crumpling, ghouls were turned into wet red smears before they could even leap and even arrows *melted* in midair. A beorn roared and charged only to begin unraveling, its great clawed paw tumbling forward but never

even reaching a Gigantes' foot. Swarms of birds dropped like rocks, shattering on the head of the dead. When a tall Revenant in yellow robes bearing a long spear pointed it at them, it then twitched jerkily and rammed it seven times into its own eye before collapsing like a stringless puppet.

"Gods," Cordelia hoarsely whispered.

"That, Your Grace, is every last remaining spellsinger come to make war," the Barrow Sword quietly said. "Burn the sight your eyes, because Creation will never witness such a thing again."

They withdrew from the wall, but not far. With this unnatural rampart having risen from nothing, taller and stronger than any barricade might hope to be, soldiers rushed back to defend it. Cordelia went deeper behind the wards to make sure that Simon's throat would be seen to properly – the bite of some ghouls carried poison – then returned to share the watch. Skeletons and ghouls climbed the wall, needing beating back even under swarm of arrows, but the tusks and beorns that tried their hand at shattering the earth instead broke their own skulls. They could hold, Cordelia thought with renewed vigor, until the Gigantes arrived. It was tense, dangerous work and twice arrows thumped into her shield but she ripped them out and the wall held. The Barrow Sword kept the defence alive, moving like a prowling cat across the rampart and beating back whatever foothold the dead gained.

The Gigantes finished the march with the same air of indifferent inevitability they had begun it with, part of the earthen wall opening as a door for them before they spread out. The fair-haired princess had learned everything there was to know of their people in Proceran archives and bought Levantine secrets at great expense, but even so she could not interpret a single of the 'words' that the giants shared with each other. Not one was spoken, subtle shifts in gesture and sorcery expressing all the Gigantes cared to share before they parted ways, nearly of all them spreading out alone along the rampart. Only two remained together, and their approach had Cordelia straightening her back.

She had little experience speaking with Gigantes, and so she was faintly grateful when the Barrow Sword emerged from a band of halberd-wielding Neustrians to join her. The two giants stood more than thirty feet tall, both shaved and one bearded. Though their people's necks were short and their legs long, it was the face that spoke of their inhumanity to Cordelia. Those large eyes paler than any human's could be, those strange ridges of cartilage that stood in place of ears. The Gigantes without the beard considered them with milk-white eyes, offering a nod to the Barrow Sword.

"Bahal," they said, voice rumbling. "You earn your charge."



"Great Elder, your praise brings me honour," the Levantine replied, offering a bow.

Those pale eyes moved to her then.

"Princess Hasenbach," they said. "You are known to us."

It was tempting to appropriate the villain's use of 'Great Elder', but risky without knowing the context. A safer answer was in order.

"This brings me honour," Cordelia replied, and Gigantes seemed satisfied.

The bearded one spoke up then.

"We come here at the word of the Living God, the Maker of Riddles, and bring this knowledge: the Young King is cornered."

Cordelia went still as a stone.

"Though the corpses of gods were profaned and the shadow of the old enemy brought back," the bearded giant continued, "the Warden and the White Knight storm the spire. Victory is at hand."

*Or defeat*, the princess thought, but did not dare speak it. The knowledge that Catherine would do whatever it took to win was reassuring, but Cordelia knew the difference between arrogance and faith. Sometimes there was no victory to be had, no matter how bold or clever or worthy you were. Sometimes all that you could hope for was for the iron of your fight to be hard enough to swallow that the Enemy would have to wait until spring to march again. She would hope, she would have faith, but she would not delude herself.

"We thank you for the knowledge brought," the Barrow Sword said, tone a little stilted.

He bowed, and Cordelia had been expecting him to so she smoothly imitated the gesture. The Gigantes eyed them for a moment more, then nodded with exaggerated slowness – as if to make sure they would see it – before striding away. No more explanation was given for any of this. The villain sagged when they were out of sight, perhaps the most human gesture she'd ever seen out of him.

"Bahal?" she lightly asked, masking the depth of her curiosity.

"The manner of my Bestowal accidentally made me part of the ancient Gigantes courts of justice," the Barrow Sword admitted.

His hand rested on the pommel of the bronze sword she had never seen him without, not any more than the bronze scale that seemed to weather ever blow of the dead without breaking. She cocked a brow.

"And what part would that be?" she asked out of honest curiosity.

"The death matches," Ishaq Deathless grimly said. "I have good reason to be glad that none of the Eighteen Cities still call themselves such."

Fascinating as that was, and Cordelia had always been intrigued by the old stories of Gigantes living among the humans of the Eighteen Cities as rulers and guides of a sort, sadly they were yet at the end of the world. Fighting to keep from reaching that last fateful fall. Cordelia raised her shield, grip strengthening around her now ragged sword, and had opened her mouth to speak when suddenly she went still. So did the Barrow Sword, and many a soldier, for a ripple had gone through Creation that even the most blind of them could feel. The dead, to the last, went still.

Atop the tall black spire that stood above all of Keter, a sphere of fire winked out.

"Gods," Cordelia Hasenbach whispered, tears coming to her eyes. "Oh, Merciful Gods. She did it. *She killed him.*"

The undead began to move again but it was chaos, nothing at all like an army. They broke up into bands around Binds, hacking at each other as much as they tried to climb the walls, and it sunk into the princess' soul that they had done it. They had destroyed the King of Death and now his armies would – there was another rippled, and Cordelia shivered. It passed over her like a humid wind, tasting her skin, and the Barrow Sword let out a soft curse.

Below them, the dead stirred again.

With feverish hatred, they fell on each other and all they saw. Broken teeth swallowed flesh and metal, tore into walls as if they were parchment and devoured all they reached. What had been an army become something altogether more terrible. Like a river of hunger the horde turned into a great horror that ate all it could touch, all it could reach. Moving like a single massive, writhing abomination Cordelia could not even begin to see the heart of. But she knew, oh she knew with iron certainty that the mind behind it lay deep inside the Crown of the Dead.

"What is this madness?" she asked, revulsion tuning her voice raw.

"They call the Riddle-Maker the Living God," the Barrow Sword said.

She turned to him, found his tanned face gone pale.

"No one's sure what he fought, to become the last of the Titans," Ishaq quietly said, "but if I had to bet I'd say it's something like this."

"Then it should be dead," the princess said.

"This isn't a city where graves stay filled, Cordelia Hasenbach," he replied.

And as they stood there, below them a god clawed its way back to life. Slowly, she reached for the parchment pressed against her heart.

—

The Knight Errant stepped out of the ruined maze, his sword in hand.

The Peregrine burned like a star to his Name, bearing no enchantment save a clarity of purpose. It was to make a better world as the Grey Pilgrim once had, by removing evil from it. By the cutting edge, if needs must. Arthur advanced alone, even though the lack of comrades at his side was fearful, for he knew his Name preferred it. Not for him the comradery of the Woe, not when his every instinct pulled him towards being the lone knight on the bridge, the challenger. The test or the savior, but neither leader nor led.

The hymns on his armour humming, he marched out while the dragon finished tormenting a company of goblin legionaries: it was stepping on whichever was on the edge of either side, making them swerve in panic one way or another as it toyed with them like a cat might with a mouse. Arthur was not sure it was a thinking creature, not like a person, but it was intelligent enough to be cruel. It knew what fear was, and despair. It seemed, he thought, *hungry* for them. Word from the rearguard was that it seemed to have seized control of the dead there, and though the Kingfisher Prince was holding he was losing ground.

Whether or not the Dead King had been ended, as some hope, they were still running out of time.

He hurried. Ugly as the thought was, the picking apart of the legionaries was covering his approach. Arthur was not so proud that he would refuse being given the first blow on such a foe, even if the price of it was the life of comrades. If he could have done anything to save them he would have, but... The Knight Errant had been raised in a war that taught hard lessons, and one of them was not to waste the chance to save most because you wanted to save all. So he hurried, stride lengthening, as goblins screamed and sweat tricked down his back.

He was half a hundred feet away from the dragon's back when it suddenly turned.

A leg jutted out of its shoulder, tearing through the glass floor, but the Knight Errant had already moved. Burnt shards trickled against his side and he struck at the twisted limb, the Peregrine humming as it tore into the side of leg. Flesh parted, burning, but there was so *much* of it and Arthur was almost disarmed when the leg was pulled back into the creature. He'd made a scar, but would it still be there if the leg was spat back out? He was not so sure. The dragon turned its full attention on him, screaming as it swiped and its claws ripped up the ground.

He ran through the trails of death, Sapan's magic roared to life and hitting the dragon's head with spikes of light not unlike the one that had turned half the maze to glass. The beast roared in pain and Arthur rolled past a claw that would have torn him in half, feeling it graze his back and leaving him with grateful relief. Callowan knights did not wear capes. The elder beast's side spat out small limbs, human limbs, only made out of writhing metal and stone as tormented faces moaned out and the horror tried to snatch his side. The Knight Errant hacked into the madness, but though the burning scars he left tore screams from the faces they were soon gone, pulled into the monster. He was doing nothing, no matter how fine his sword.

And the dragon was laughing as it struck, ignoring streaks of fire and lightning from mages as well as Sapan's strange spikes returned, shaking them off where it had disregarded the rest. Arthur knelt under a great paw the claws closed in on him. He tried to slip in between but they headed him off, closing quicker, leaving him to realize that the drakon could have killed him already. It wanted him to *fear*, to fall apart. Instead the Knight Errant straightened his back, gritting his teeth and swinging at the coming death. Bone gave and -and the entire limb toppled forward, the cage around him falling with it.

Arthur had a glimpse or a rail-thin silhouette under a cloak and a single-edged sword of wood, a narrow face granting him a nod.

As he watched the elder dragon began to be rent asunder by cuts from every direction, the rest of the Emerald Swords walking the creature's skin unimpeded to carve through limbs and even its neck. The monster at its own flesh, growing it back, but it was an opening and Arthur took it. Swallowing his fear, he reached for the dragon's fleshy side and began to climb it. Hands pawed at him, reaching for his belt and his limbs to pull him inside the beast, but he shook them off with Name strength to continue his rise. He would rise, and he would wound the Evil thing as Lady Antigone had asked of him.

Halfway up the flank something ripped under him and he shouted with alarm as a limb exploded out of the flesh where he'd been, a

long stretch of bone that bled out a thin membrane looking like an insect wing's. Desperately clutching at the limb as it drove him sky high, the Knight Errant fought the hands trying to drag him in. He was slashing at the bone but it was doing nothing, only scars, and what were those worth when they disappeared in a moment? Arthur's frustration mounted, a lifetime of wrongs he'd been forced to just watch laughing at him.

It was like there was a wall, like the Gods had decided he could do good but no further than this line and every effort he'd make past it would come to vain. He'd thought he'd gotten past it in the Tower, when he had chosen right over wrong and all the rest, but here he was again: flailing at the dark, accomplishing nothing. What had Dustin even died for, if Arthur was just going to *keep failing to save people who needed him*? He refused that repellent, disgusting thought. That were some things, some entities beyond reckoning. That some walls couldn't be broken.

That there was anything in this world that the Knight Errant could not **Wound**.

An Emerald Sword cut the wing bone but Arthur pulled himself on it, Name flowing through his veins like fire, and even as it fell ran down the length. It was too quick a fall, too long a length, but still he ran – and even as he came short, just before he began to fall he leapt up with both hands on the Peregrine. Hanging in the air for the barest of moments he struck, the edge of the blade forged from the Grey Pilgrim's death and named by the Black Queen striking the elder dragon's flesh. **Wound**, everything that Arthur Foundling was screamed. And in that moment there was nothing in Creation that was beyond his reckoning, so the drakon's side was split open as if a titan's axe had fallen upon it.

And the wound did not close.

Arthur fell down as the drakon screamed, the ground hitting him mercilessly. His head rang and his limbs ached, the breath snatched out of him replaced by fire. He rolled to the side, trying and failing to get up, and saw Emerald Sword cut through the limb that would have turned him to paste. There was more, he saw as he caught a flicker of movement. The Affable Burglar was running across the open grounds, almost impossible to see even as she moved through open grounds. She was clutching something in her hand, though Arthur saw nothing more than a splash of colours. The dragon saw more, a forest of limbs erupting at the villainess, but a massive wolf bounded in the way and took the blow for the Burglar. The animal died, body crushed, as the villainess slithered through the promised deaths.

The Knight Errant gasped, spitting out blood as he leaned on the Peregrine to get back on his feet. He could cover the last of the way, he thought, but his limbs would not stop shaking. He only

got on his knees. How many feet were left before she reached the wound? A hundred, maybe less. Only before the Burglar could get there the ground under her began to hollow, a tentacle of flesh destroying her footing, and though she ran across the collapsing space it was when the dragon blew its flames. The transparent death filled the air and the Affable Burglar would have been swallowed whole – if someone hadn't thrown themselves in the way.

The Painted Knife's mangled body, limbs broken and twisted, rippled for a heartbeat as an aspect lit up.

A heartbeat later the flames were gone and the elder dragon's head with them, as if it had annihilated itself, while Kallia the Painted Knife collapsed to the ground and the Affable Burglar raced through the last few feet. As her hand rose, at last Arthur saw what it was she held: a painted mask of clay.

The Knight Errant saw it disappeared into the wound, and only then did he let himself pass out.

—

For the second time that day, Cordelia's fingers shied away from the last words Agnes had left her.

Not because she thought there may yet be a darker moment, but because her attention was grabbed by a most unexpected sight: a flying fortress was coming to them. One of the great behemoths the Praesi called the Old Mothers, which she'd been told were all grounded. And it did seem that the magical castle had been wounded, for a third of it was missing and the insides were bare. Swarms of vultures were coming at it relentlessly, dying against translucent shields as they ate away at them, but it was slow going and Cordelia parsed out what would happen before it did.

The great fortress crashed before their walls before the shields broke, ground rippling and dead dying in droves.

The Gigantes, though troubled and wary of the sudden turn of the dead, opened a gate for the hundred or so Praesi that ran out of their broken fortress. Most of them seemed to be legionaries, but there were also richly dressed mages and two that stood out from the rest. Alaya of Satus, once the Dread Empress of Praes and now the appointed chancellor of the confederation that'd emerged from that empire's ashes, would have been noticeable in any crowd. Cordelia was more inclined to men than women and generally inclined to despise this woman in particular, but she would not deny she was one of the most beautiful people she'd ever seen.

The other was not a great beauty, but she was the Barrow Sword's promised fulfilled: Adanna of Smyrna, the Blessed Artificer, was running along side the once-empress.

It was instinct when Cordelia retreated deeper towards the ealamal, into the tent where she had restlessly sat before taking up the sword. An attempt to reassert control in the face of the unexpected, to hold the rod that commanded the dead angel in her hands. It was Brother Simon who introduced Chancellor Alaya when she arrived, though the Blessed Artificer burst in without waiting for the same.

"Princess Cordelia," Lady Adanna said. "How is the weapon?"

Cordelia only knew so much about the technicalities of the ealamal, besides the fact that it had been filled to the very brim and remained able to be commanded. She saw no need to admit that, however.

"You may have a look yourself," she suggested, "so long as you do not attempt to affect it."

"I wouldn't, princess," Lady Adanna assured her, perhaps a tad condescendingly.

Cordelia wondered if the other woman would have dared while she was still First Prince, then set aside the thought as unworthy of either the women it involved. More burning still was Chancellor Alaya's sympathetic gaze when the Blessed Artificer wandered off to do as suggested. The Soninke did not go as far as saying 'Named, huh' as if commonly mourning, but the cocked eyebrow had much the same implication.

"Princess Cordelia," Chancellor Alaya greeted her instead.

"Chancellor Alaya," Cordelia politely greeted the woman who'd tried to have her assassinated on twenty-nine separate occasions.

Thirty, if you counted the poison in her favourite fish soup and the lemon water as different attempts.

"May I take a seat?" the other woman smiled. "I'm afraid I will be of little use out there."

The fair-haired princess conceded with a nod and Alaya claimed a chair with sinuous grace that seemed almost absurd when paired with the rickety wooden furniture. Like a pearl tossed into offal. Simon looked askance at Cordelia, who discreetly shook her head back. The lay brother left the tent.

"I expect you have little more news of the fighting in the city than we do," Cordelia leadingly said.

"My mages believed the Dead King to have perished," Chancellor Alaya replied, "but there is some debate as to what seized control of the dead after."

"Some sort of ancient dragon god, if my sources are to be believed," she said.

The former empress took that with the unflinching aplomb of someone who'd ruled over the Wasteland for many years.

"Unfortunate," Chancellor Alaya noted. "Two of my finest mages were looking into a way to undo the Dead King's mastery over death, however, and though they did not succeed it seems they have learned something that might be of import."

"And that would be?"

"If Lady Nahiza and her assistant are correct, then this... draconic usurper only commands the dead in Keter for now," the dark-skinned chancellor told her. "Its mastery grows by the moment, and in time it will command them all, but the Dead King's reins were as a great kingdom and it yet holds only this very city."

Cordelia's fingers tightened around the ivory baton she held in her lap.

"Would you," she said with forced calm, "have any notion of how quickly that mastery will spread?"

It was a polite, dispassionate way to ask how long the Principate had before some evil god mastered the dead destroying it and *ate everything alive*. Cordelia did not know whether or not this risen dragon would be as much a terror as the Dead King had been, but in truth it hardly mattered. So long as the dead did not collapse into warband, then Procer was buried and the rest of Calernia with it. Even if the Principate was not made into a great army of undead, the strange powers the dragon god lent to the dead seemed just as fearful. It was still defeat, the end of it all.

"My experts are uncertain," Chancellor Alaya admitted. "It could be an hour, a day or a week. They cannot tell if the dead in Keter were usurped because of proximity or ease of spread."

*Which tells me nothing*, Cordelia thought, even as she felt the wards shiver. She rose to her feet, marching past her guest with lack of manners that sat ill even at the end of the world to peek outside. The golden hue in the air was gone and the vultures were swarming. The wall seemed on the edge of falling, even with the desperate efforts of the soldiers and the Gigantes. Feigning calm, Cordelia returned to her seat across from the woman who had once been called Malicia.

"A ward collapsed," the chancellor mildly said.



"One of the boundaries," Cordelia said, then added in a moment of harsh honesty, "and the most important. Now the vultures will begin devouring men."

"It is a matter of time until the defences break, then," Chancellor Alaya noted.

Cordelia wondered if the other woman's calm was as put on as hers. It must be, she thought. Not even Praesi could face their own death and Calernia's with such blitheness, surely.

"A quarter hour, perhaps as much as half," she forced herself to reply.

And under the dark-eyed woman's unblinking gaze, she set down the ivory baton on the table. Malicia – and that name was more honest than the others, for deep down Cordelia still thought of her as that – stared at it for a long moment but did not ask a question. No doubt the Eyes of the Empire had told her exactly what the artefact commanded the ealamal looked like. They matched gazes, neither allowing emotion to reach their faces. To Cordelia's faint surprise, it was the once-empress that looked away first.

"I do understand, you know," Alaya quietly said. "The comfort of holding it in your hand."

Cordelia's face tightened.

"Holding what?" she asked.

The other woman considered that, for a moment.

"Your fate," Alaya finally said. "Made simple and savage, perhaps, but still your fate."

She faintly smiled.

"I knew it was making it all crooked, when I sought the Sahelian gate-maker," the once-empress confessed. "That I was breaking faith with Amadeus, with the tale we told ourselves of a world where the two of us were enough to win."

"So why did you?" Cordelia quietly asked.

"I ask myself that question every day," Alaya of Satus said, sounding tired. "And the answer changes. I have so many reasons, so many excuses, but in the end I suspect there is a single truth buried beneath them. Like a corpse in a grave."

The blue-eyed princess did not interrupt, waiting patiently as she watched the other woman's face.

"I didn't believe we could win," Alaya said. "Not truly, not the way he did. I believe we might have gains, that we might manage

our defeats, but I never thought that if we took on the world it would end in anything but tears."

Cordelia, who had spent years and a fortune in silver learning all she could of the Dread Empress of Praes, knew enough about what had brought the dark-skinned beauty to the Tower to feel a sliver of pity. But no more than that, for being handed tragedy was never an excuse for handing it to others. Silence hung above their heads like a waiting sword, growing thicker even as the distant sounds of battle closed in.

"They might win," Cordelia said. "There are Named and armies yet fighting. They might win and slay this... dragon god."

"They might," Alaya agreed, "or the Dead King's last revenge might yet devour all of Calernia. There is no way to tell."

The screams and the clash of steel were so close they might have been mere feet away from the tent. It meant, Cordelia knew, that there was only one barricade left. If even that. All else had fallen. She swallowed thickly, fingers so tight around the baton that her bloodless knuckles matched the ivory's paleness. And it was all coming apart, all coming to an end, and Cordelia just felt so fucking tired.

"Is it too much to ask," she asked Alaya, "that we be allowed to face the end of the world without a mask on?"

The Soninke beauty looked as if she'd been slapped.

"Sometimes," Chancellor Alaya said, "the mask is all you have left."

And Cordelia understood that, she truly did, but then...

"I just want," she murmured, "to be able to weep honest tears before I die. Only once."

"We might not die," Alaya said, then her face tightened. "Well, perhaps not you. I do not believe your ealamal will spare the likes of me."

"I don't know if it will spare anyone," Cordelia admitted. "Or even how far it will reach. It is a blind sword to swing, one that save half the world or kill it. *I cannot know before I swing it.*"

"And the world," Alaya smiled, "it's yours to save?"

"I am a Hasenbach," Cordelia simply said. "I have a duty."

And she would not compromise on that, not even in the face of the end times. A scream sounded, then the sound of flesh being ripped into. It must be right outside the tent to be heard so clearly,

she knew. There were no lines of defence left. She reached for the ivory rod. It was not a complicated sequence to trigger the ealamal's release, just one impossible to reach by accident. Cordelia rotated the baton's sculpted lionhead and extended the length, beginning the works and reaching all but the very last. All it would take, now, was to snap it closed.

"I think it might be the pride of the young to demand hard truths even at the end," Alaya of Satus said, breaking the silence, "but I strive to be the sort of woman who settles all her debts."

And there was, they both knew, a kingdom's worth of corpses due between them.

"So I will tell you this," the dark-skinned woman murmured, "though I would rather not speak it, or even think it."

The once-empress smiled, and it was the most heartbreakingly sad thing Cordelia Hasenbach had ever seen.

"I see my death now," Alaya said, "how I will end, and I regret it."

Her fingers closed into fists.

"I wish I had trusted him," Dread Empress Malicia said. "It would have been a better end, the two of us against the world."

And Cordelia knew what she meant, down to the marrow of her bone. Because she knew trust as well, remembered sitting with a woman she'd once hated in the heart of city that should have been a horror but she had found instead to be a wonder. She remembered looking at Catherine Foundling and seeing underneath the warlord the girl who just wanted to help people who'd helped her. Who wanted to make a fairer, kinder world for orcs and goblins and all the lost that'd carried her to the throne. The realization that she was not facing a plague made woman but a dragon of the old tales, fearsome and vicious in defending her hoard but not genuinely evil.

Cordelia wanted to see the city they might make together and the world around it.

But in the end, she thought, what did want matter? Like the three cousins of the tale, she was fighting Death – whether it wore the Dead King's face or some other horror's as a mask mattered little. It was the same spring, the same inevitability. Cordelia had hoped that the sword and helm would be enough to get her through the horror, but now she had to face the truth. They were losing, lost, and moments away from even the ealamal being in the enemy's hand. Evil had won the last laugh.

The best she could hope was for her iron to stick in the Enemy's throat.

A ghoulish figure tore into the tent flap, ripping it up and swallowing a chunk, only for a pair of skeletons to burst past it. Chancellor Alaya drew a knife, rising to her feet, but Cordelia's hands were on the baton. Until she recalled her last gift, and her fingers reached for the parchment against her breast. On the third time they closed, and as the fair-haired princess took up the wisp of parchment she unfolded it to find her cousin's words. Guidance, she prayed, or a secret to pass through the dark. Her cousin's death made into one last blade pointed at the enemy. Instead, what she found was a single sentence hastily scrawled.

*No matter where, no matter when, Agnes wrote, I will always bet on Cordelia Hasenbach.*

She reared back, as if struck, even as death poured screaming into the tent. Too many to defeat, too many to hold the ealamal against even with Named. But all she could think of was the tears in Agnes' eyes on that cold day where the soldiers had brought her to Rhenia, after her mother's death. How lost she'd looked, how she'd burst out weeping when Cordelia pulled her close. A bet, huh. Trust from beyond the grave. And here Cordelia had been, making pride out of something she'd dared to call duty. The shame burned at her. The tent began to fall, pegs falling as the dead charged, and Cordelia Hasenbach took the ivory baton in hand. Cordelia had wanted to see the world the two of them might make.

But she was, she found, willing to die for it too.

With a scream, Cordelia Hasenbach broke the ivory baton as she made a bet of her own.

—

The Witch of the Woods stood alone on a plain of glass as the drakon turned and she slowly lowered her hood.

Antigone had never borne a surname, for the only man she might have called a father did not have one. Humans sometimes took a husband's or a wife's, she knew, but though she cared for Hanno they had never wed or cared to and so her name remained as it was, both beginning and end. She liked it better that way, in truth, for it was not just a word: it was a gift. She did not remember who she had been before Kreios found her, and so all that she was had begun with the name he gave her. *Antigone*. After the Titan he'd held higher in his esteem than any other, dead long before mankind's age began.

She too, her father had once told her, had once stood alone.

The Titans had been given a choice once, after the end of the Long War where they triumphed over the drakoi. The last of them debated whether to seek old glories, the undoing of their losses, or to instead offer a hand to the lesser peoples that had come to be as they fought their great struggle. Seven, she'd been told as a child, had come to decide to clap their lessers – children, they called them – in chains and put them to work until glories of the Gigantes could be restored. Only one had refused, and Antigone instead went west to found eighteen cities that'd outlast all the rest.

Yet when the price of hubris, of trying to unmake the costs paid to Creation for victory, had come calling it was not the seven that perished. Only the Riddle-Maker remained, the last of the Titans, forever shamed that instead of bringing back the lost his great work had instead killed all of them save for him. And even he was broken, lessened. It was why Antigone had never once thought today that she could simply wait out the storm, that if she stood alone long enough her father would make all the trouble go away. Kreios' divinity had been made fragile, finite.

And he had spent it piece by piece since he came to Keter, matching the Dead King blow for blow. Given himself away to save the lives of the children he had fought to put in chains, putting out a star to keep fireflies alight. He had begun with a great work and hardly ceased since, holding nothing back once the Dead King revealed that he had stolen the corpses of two Titans fallen in the Long War. Fighting two of his old comrades come back undead would bring him to the brink, she knew. However lessened and incomplete they were still Titans.

There would be no god standing at the end, no matter who the victor, and so it was in Antigone's hands.

She missed the painted clay mask, the first face the kind giants of Hemera had given her as a girl. Yet even without its protection the Witch of the Woods barely even felt the wind against her skin, her body a stranger to itself. It had a price, to slay even the shadow of a drakon. It was the monster of an age long past, meant to be fought by folk that loomed too tall for even the last gasps of the Age of Wonders. But Antigone had stood in great shadows all her life, known only boots too large for her to fill ever since she first heard the song of Creation. Ever since she was a girl she'd fought to be more, to be complete, and fallen short.

She was the Witch of the Woods, belonging neither to the airy spires of the Gigantes or the crowded cities of mankind. Her home was in the in-between, the antechamber of greatness. Even her Name only allowed her to be a shadow of what Titans had once been, of what Gigantes aspired to be. Antigone, eyes blinking into the too-bright light of the hall, looked upon the drakon

that screamed out unending rage. Warped Creation around it simply by existing. Only it wasn't truly a drakon, was it? Not yet, anyway.

"I am a shadow," Antigone said, "but you are one as well. Shall we see which runs deeper?"

The weight of the awakening god was turned on her, her power rising to fight as the air itself began to eat her, but it didn't matter. The body was just a shell, eyes to see. She had already put all of herself in her mask, her face, and the Burglar had delivered it onto the beast. It had sunk deep, as deep as it would, and coated in the Dead King's finest trick it remained whole.

As did Antigone's soul within it.

**"Gather,"** she whispered.

Only it was not moonlight and the power of the land she called to her this time, but blood and sinew and bone. The red writ of the drakon.

**"Cradle."**

With open hands she brought all she had gathered into her grasp, giving a reverence unearned. But it came into her embrace, joined with her, as the magics she had learned did. Closed against her she held the wriggling essence of the dead god, trying to slip her grasp.

**"Sing."**

To be one with the world, to see the manifold paths of consequence: the stone that became the avalanche, the droplet that became the tide. It had been a pure thing, all that Antigone aspired to be. It had let her see what the Gigantes saw, for the barest of moments, and wield the greatest of their works as her own. Only it was not her father's song she sang today, the lessons she loved. Instead she sang the red and the hunger, the doom-made-intellect that was the drakon. And in that perfect moment she understood it, as perfectly as she was allowed to understand Creation.

And so she was a god, a circle full and complete, the crowned essence of the act to eat.

"It was mine," Antigone smiled, and closed her eyes.

And even as her body fell apart, she took her first and last act as a god: she ate herself, until nothing was left.

Not even a shadow.

—

In the ashes of a broken city, Kreios Maker-of-Riddles fell to his knees and wept, for as the last of what he had been passed he had felt his only daughter die.

## Chapter 68: Hallow; Hollow

*“And though her schemes lay broken around her, the Intercessor only laughed and said: ‘When one defeats the inevitable, the word for it is not victory but delay.’”*

*– Extract from the ‘Parables of the Lost and Found’, disputed Firstborn religious text*

Yara of Nowhere sat on the Dead King’s throne with legs crossed, smiling as I Saw from atop the spire the way the stories fell into place.

The Dead King’s last act of spite threatening to swallow us all, the desperate fighting below us to keep the drakon from waking. And intertwined with it, the story Yara of Nowhere wanted to cut out throats with: Cordelia and her ealamal. I couldn’t See Cordelia herself, she wasn’t Named, but everything happening around her was a strong enough trajectory I could just barely make her out – like tracing someone out of shadows. It’d be the same for the Bard, I figured. How fucked would we be, if Cordelia had taken up a Name that night in Salia and Yara had gotten an open invitation to be in her head? We might well already be dead if not for the Augur.

The stories raced, threading with each other into what I already knew was meant to be our noose. We got our miracles, the Barrow Sword and the Blessed Artificer and the Gigantes, but we’d gotten them *too* early. And though I could See the drakon’s end in the course of the Witch of the Woods – at a cost that had my heart clenching in pain for Hanno – it would be too late. The defence of the ealamal would first collapse, the shadow of Cordelia Hasenbach moving and then... light, blinding Light until there was nothing at all. A hint of Hanno living through it, but it would be as the Intercessor had said. He’d be one of half a hundred across all of Calernia, a continent slowly gasping out its death rattle.

A quarter-hour, I realized, would be all it took for the Intercessor to slaughter Calernia with: the span between the fall of the ealamal’s defences and Antigone saving us all. How small a thing to kill a continent with.

Then the both of us went still, because the current shifted. One last hidden string, a single grain of sand left in the midst of the machinations of the Intercessor. The Augur, I realized. She’d

left something of herself behind, something small. Couldn't be more than a sentence else it would be too much, too large. The Intercessor would have seen it, and perhaps I as well. Only neither of us had, because the Augur had died and given the last of herself into the hand of a woman without a Name. Like an arrow loosed in a dead angle, the words had flown unseen until they hit and now it was too late. The Light-to-be went dark.

From beyond the grave, Agnes Hasenbach took us all for a ride one last time.

And just like that, I thought, we'd won. I did not know if Cordelia was alive or anyone with her, but the ealamal was out of play. I saw no story where Named hands lit the bonfire meant to swallow us all. I breathed out shakily as below us the Witch of the Woods' last march began, watching the way the Intercessor's face tightened.

"You always did see a little too far for your own good," she said, "didn't you, Agnes?"

"Catherine?"

Hanno's voice was tinted with worry, but I did not turn. The Intercessor was still here and I did not dare look away from her sitting form. Not yet, even though she was beaten.

"We live," I said. "The ealamal sleeps. And I'm sorry, Hanno, but-"

"I know," the White Knight quietly cut through. "I can't get there in time to Save her."

"You get to keep Kreios," the Intercessor shrugged, "though there's nothing much left there. Your own doing, Catherine: you've leaned so hard into the changing of the age all the relics are getting buried with its turn."

I breathed in, pulling on Night, but the Bard did not seem worried. She brushed back long fair hair, pawing at her side until she found her silver flask. Knowing that striking at her now would achieve nothing save giving her a way out, I instead wove myself eyes. The moment I saw through them I looked at Masego, who was kneeling by Akua's side. She was prone and her breathing heavy, but the calm on Hierophant's face brought out the same in me. He liked her enough that if she was at risk of dying from her wounds he'd be showing worry. And wounded she was, I found now that I took the time for a second look.

I could see where the Dead King's spell had hit her. It wasn't as obvious a killing stroke some of the others he'd used, but the edges of her right hand were warped and there was something about the skin... It was dead, I realized. Her entire arm was a



cadaver's, every part of it dead. It hid beneath her armour, but I saw the faint stiffness creeping up the side neck. How much of her had been killed with that single stroke: half, a third? My fingers clenched. I was not sure even Light would be able to heal that, but at least she was still living. And the yellow strands of sorcery around Masego's hands seemed to be easing her breathing.

"Hierophant?" I called out, my sole flesh eye still on the Bard.

"There is no danger of death," he said. "She should be able to speak again soon."

I breathed in sharply. I'd not even realized she couldn't, so I took a third look even as other eyes saw Hanno walk up to my side with a grim face. Only my gaze strayed from Akua, as though I was worried there was something else I'd just Seen.

"You are forming a godhead," I evenly said.

He smiled.

"I have not yet digested all I gained from the Dead King," Hierophant said, "but when I have I expect my perspective will be... broadened."

And that'd be enough, we both knew. The godhead was just a trick of perspective, he'd once said, and even an old monster like the Intercessor agreed. He'd have the power and the understanding, and that'd be enough.

"So that's why you're still here," I softly said, matching the Bard's gaze.

She drank deep of her flask, grimacing after her first swallow. Something reeking of strong liquor and oranges reached my nostrils.

"It would have been cleaner if you let me do it through Cordelia," Yara of Nowhere said, voice rough from the drink. "One stroke, nobody suffers. But I've already told you: if you demand the hard way, it's what you'll get."

And I believed her, or at least believed *she* believed it, only I could see an angle she might use for – a whisper spread across the world, the first use of **Guide** I'd ever caught her in. And in that moment that followed, I saw as she cleared her failed story off the board and dragged in another.

"It is already finished, Bard," the White Knight calmly told her. "Spite can only-"

I raised my hand to silence him, and though he looked somewhat annoyed he stopped talking.

"Say nothing without choosing your words carefully," I said, voice echoing across the Dead King's hall. "We are now a single wrong sentence away from dying."

Yara smiled, Hanno stiffened and my fingers closed to tightly around my staff that the knuckles turned white. I could see the story she was going to ride now. I should have realized from the start that it was fucking arrogance to think we'd gotten her. The Augur had broken her plan, sure, but the Intercessor wasn't a blood-drunk villain on her first rampage. She'd laid *foundations* for this and none of them were gone.

"You said," Hanno murmured, "that the ealamal sleeps."

"And Cordelia Hasenbach won't wake it, if she lives," I said, sliding a glance Yara's way.

She tossed an affable smile my way, but no answers. It was a halfway good sign she hadn't taken the opportunity to gloat, but it might just be she wanted to keep her cards close to the chest.

"But the Seraphim are still silenced," I said, "and the ealamal still filled to the brim with Light. She doesn't need *Cordelia*, she just needs anyone at all to light the fire."

"No one will," the White Knight confidently said.

Far below our feet the drakon died, as if the Heavens themselves were echoing the word of their favourite son. The Bard looked untroubled, which had Hanno on edge. As it should be, because with the drakon gone, devouring every dead it had come to reign over in its death throes – though that sovereignty had not spread far beyond Keter, and the rest of the dead still stood – the battle on the ground was won. There was no reason for someone to use the ealamal, as Hanno had so confidently asserted. However horrendous the costs, we had won.

By the mortal way of looking at it, anyway.

"Not a hero or a villain," I quietly agreed. "But she's not me, Hanno. She works with more than just Named."

"The Seraphim," he softly said. "You believe... no, it doesn't matter. We need the Hierophant to-"

Two sounds from behind us. First Masego's soft gasp as he rose to his feet, then Akua's rasping cough as she gained back her voice. I watched as Hierophant took a few stumbling steps, then went still as sorcery coiled around him in tight rings. Hanno drew his sword, but I laid my hand on his arm. It wasn't an attack, it was his own magic. He'd finished eating the Dead King and so his perspective was undergoing an adjustment. He'd be out of the rest of this conversation, as much because of the terrible efforts as

because providence would ensure he was not there. He couldn't be, because he was part of the story as the opposite of the Seraphim.

"Do nothing," I said. "The path it goes down if we interrupt him is... unpleasant."

Enlightenment stopped halfway through was just madness, and that was a dangerous thing to afflict a man as powerful as Masego with.

"What *is* he doing?" Hanno bluntly asked.

"He is forging a godhead of his own," Akua rasped out as she rose to her feet, "as one of Below's. An Evil god. What will your Seraphim say to that, White Knight?"

"They'll aim to kill it," the White Knight said. "Before it can darken Creation. But they cannot reach out in such a way. They are yet silenced."

"No, not anymore," I told him. "Just gone quiet for a while more, thanks to our friend."

"That's me," Yara helpfully told him.

She was, I realized, starting to have fun.

"Then they should still be unable to-" Hanno began, then his jaw clenched. "The ealamal. Gods forgive us, it is a *Seraphim's* corpse."

"And filled to the brim with enough Light to scour half of Calernia," I flatly said. "She just needs to draw their eye there so they can throw their genocidal tantrum."

I expect he would have argued with that characterization of the Choir of Judgement – fair enough, it wasn't the most flattering interpretation – but Akua interrupted. She'd moved stiffly as she approached my side, her right leg likely affected by the spell even if it'd not been entirely killed, but she was breathing fine and both her eyes seemed to be working. A knot I'd not known was in my belly began to loosen.

"Yet she has not," the golden-eyed sorceress said. "As demonstrated by the fact that Catherine and I still breathed. She still needs something from us."

Yara toasted her.

"If you'd been half that clever a girl," the Intercessor smiled, "you might have had a chance at knowing what real love feels like before you die."

I'd known Akua for years. As an enemy, a prisoner, a companion and one more thing since. I'd made a study of her, and so though her face changed little I could see how that little sentence slid right between her ribs. It had stung, and so she retaliated.

"Babble however you wish, Intercessor," she coldly replied, "but you are running out of luck."

*Shit*, I thought, getting what would happen just before it did. Yara of Nowhere grinned at us, blue eyes bright in the dim light of the Dead King's hall.

"I *am* luck, girl," the Intercessor said. "Providence made flesh. This isn't a fight, it's a game – and we'll play as many times as it takes before I win."

Akua had been baited. 'I am providence', that was Yara's story. Not a Named, not an enemy, just a force of nature. We could no more be her foe than we could be the enemy of a river or a mountain. And Akua had given her the opportunity to get it out there and get it out first, without even restoring to something like a monologue. But my eye narrowed, because this wasn't the sort of game where you steal an advance without giving something in return. *As many times as it takes*, Yara had said. Which meant she had more strings to her bow than Masego's apotheosis. Figuring what those were, I thought, would let me steal a step of my own.

But first I needed to get our own story out.

I went rifling through my tattered cloak, getting out the long dragonbone pipe that Masego had given me when we were barely more than children. I got out a packet of wakeleaf as Akua sighed and Hanno shot me an incredulous look, stuffing the bowl before I pulled on Night. Fire bloomed, lighting the leaf, but it also shivered across the ground. Slithering over the corpse of the Mirror Knight, finding what I was looking for. I breathed in deep of the wakeleaf, savouring the burn in my lungs as I stole back the Fetter that Christophe had carried. The Intercessor smiled.

"What is it that the three of you always say?" she mused. "Ah, right – *mistake*."

She cocked her head to the side, drumming her fingers against the silver flask.

"I can see why you all do it, it's strangely satisfying," Yara of Nowhere told me. "Shall I explain your fuckup, Catherine? It feels like the courteous thing."

"I made them equal," I said. "Is that what you're going to say?"

She hid her surprise, but not quite well enough. Yeah, I'd figured it would work like that. See, the reason we weren't currently all dead was because the Intercessor needed a story behind her to get the Seraphim to pitch a fit and immolate Keter, if not all of Calernia. She was manoeuvring to get that through our conversation here, though I wasn't sure exactly *what* she needed out of us. That was her story, her play. By going for the Fetters I'd made them our story, our equivalent, and that was where she thought I'd made a mistake. Creation ran on symmetry: a Black Knight for every White Knight, an aspect of Protect for every aspect of Destroy.

Yara's path to victory needed a story, so by making the Fetters ours I'd made it so they would need a story behind them to work on her.

I'd known it would have that cost from the start, though, and it was worth it. Akua had made the Fetters without being Named, even if Named had helped. It meant, and Bard had admitted it herself, that she didn't actually know how they worked or what they did. She'd called them shackles not as a potshot but because she didn't know they were called the Fetters or what exactly they would do to her. We might not know exactly what the Intercessor wanted out of us here up here, but she was also in the dark about Akua's creation. That was worth the price of attaching a story to them.

"She's delaying," Hanno evenly said. "Waiting it out until the Hierophant finishes apotheosis."

"Was it worth it?" Yara asked him curiously. "You've gotta realize that even two days ago you would have been able to end this in a moment."

She snapped her fingers, smiled.

"But you just had to go your own way, leave the Seraphim behind," the Intercessor said. "So now the ties are cut and you can't guide them. So I ask again – was it worth it, the sense of satisfaction that carried you up this spire?"

Hanno took half a step back, looking like he'd been slapped. Had she planned that, I wondered? That if he became the White Knight again it would be without a tie to Judgement. Our struggle in the Arsenal had been years ago and I still kept unearthing deeper layers to her schemes even now. I pulled at my pipe, closing my eye, and found my first opening. She'd gone after both Akua and Hanno personally, but it was only Hanno who was being treated as a threat. Yara had tried to hurt Akua, but Hanno was being *disgraced*. He's the only one of two she sees as a threat, I realized. Because of his Name? No, shouldn't be. The Fetters would need a story but not a Name.

It was about the story. Which meant she thought Hanno had a story that might allow him to hold one of the Fetters but not Akua. Why? I studied the golden-eyed sorceress through eyes of Night, Seeing no nascent Name in her. She was wounded but not at risk of dying and her beauty was barely marred so... Ah, I thought. *There it is. You don't think Akua can take up a Fetter unless she's dying.* And the damning thing was that she was most likely right. It wasn't even about character, at least not in the moral sense. Akua's journey had been one of fighting free from prisons within and without. She would not enter another cage, not after refusing the Tower's.

Even if she forced herself, the story would be weak. It might not work.

It looked bad, I thought, but once more by pressing forward Yara had given me something. She was attacking us but not trying to establish a story of her own. That told me more than she'd meant it to. I opened my eye.

"Hanno's right," I calmly said. "You're waiting us out. You don't actually need anything from *us*, do you Yara? Hierophant's already undergoing apotheosis, and that's all you needed to get the Seraphim there. You just can't get them to move before he's *actually* a god."

They'd refuse, I decided, and she couldn't force them. There were still a lot of heroes in Keter, enough that as long as there was even the possibility of Masego being stopped the Seraphim wouldn't just burn the city to cinders. The moment he came through on the other side, though, the calculations changed. It was no longer the possibility of Hierophant forging a godhead against the destruction of the Grand Alliance, it was a risen god sworn to Below against the destruction of a handful of Named and earthly armies. To a Choir, it would be choice that basically made itself. She was attacking us for the same reason she'd boasted that she was providence: she had nothing to defend.

Yara reached behind the Dead King's throne, fishing out her ragged old lute, and set it across her lap. Then she gave me the most vicious grin.

"I guess you're right," she mused. "If one of you killed Zeze, it'd sure stop my evil plan."

My pipe clattered against the stone, spilling ash and smoke. I didn't remember sheathing my sword, but it was out in my hand in a heartbeat. Part of me was ready to apologize if I was wrong, but I wasn't. Hanno's eyes were calm as he held the Severance, taking a single step forward. Akua brushed against my side, a comforting presence I dimly realized I'd expected. Not even for me but because she cared for Masego herself. She'd called it a

nudge, righting a wrong left to fester, and she'd not lied. But it'd been more than that too.

"Hanno," I said, "this is exactly what she wants."

"I am aware," the White Knight evenly replied. "But you have confirmed yourself, Catherine, that should the Hierophant finish his apotheosis it will bring about mass slaughter."

"We don't beat her like this," I hissed. "Not if we let her-"

"Kill me after, if it makes you feel better," Hanno of Arwad tiredly said. "Two lives for hundreds of thousands? That is not a choice, it is a *duty*."

"Or you could die in the attempt," Akua said. "Stripping us of your strength, just as the Intercessor wishes."

The White Knight considered us for a long moment, then shook his head.

"I probably will," he said. "But he'll die too. A fair bargain."

I had nothing to threaten him with, I realized. He'd already decided he had a duty and he was dead. I'd once given Tariq pause by threatening to murder the Grand Alliance and wield its remains against Keter should it cross me, but that wouldn't work here. The cause was spent, the battle ended, and I had given too much of myself to Calernia for Hanno to believe me if I swore calamity over this. He knew me too well.

He was, in some ways, my friend.

"I wish it could be otherwise," the White Knight told me, and I believed him. "But it is Catherine Foundling who would fight me over this, not the Warden."

The echo of Akua's words returned to haunt me, the wants of the woman and the needs of the queen. The tall hero straightened, blade rising.

"We'll all lose friends today," Hanno said. "I'm sorry it had to be by my hand, Catherine."

And was that to be it? I'd kill him or he killed Masego and maybe I'd lose both anyway. The Intercessor had grabbed me by the hair and dragged me back on the Tower's steps, my bloody knife in hand. What life was I to take this time, how many was I to bury?

"You'll have to hold him back," Akua murmured, "before I can land a curse. I believe I have something that can hold him down, though I know not all the strings to his bow."

And I breathed in sharply, because I had my way out. The Intercessor herself had given it to me earlier.

"It won't work," I said, and Hanno stilled.

His eyes were on me, his gaze steady as he looked for the lie.

"She has other stories lying in wait," I said. "Killing Hierophant only makes her change to them."

"Other stories," the White Knight slowly said. "Such as?"

And I'd not known then, but it seemed so obvious now that I'd felt out her schemes. No matter how skilled her hand, Yara wouldn't have been able to be *sure* that Masego would forge a godhead. Her story, though, was that of the Choir of Judgement striking down an Evil god. And it so happened there was one of these certain to be at hand.

"It's Sve Noc," I said. "We mended Night, made it better, and raised them anew. They're more dangerous now and they won't burn out. Judgement will want to end them and they can try it through me."

I wasn't sure if they'd win, but it wouldn't matter. The struggle would kill the people the Bard wanted dead anyway and that was the whole point. I watched Hanno game it through, wonder if everyone could be Saved by killing me as well, but even if he could do it there was no guarantee the Intercessor didn't have a third string lying in wait. It would be just like her, I thought as my eye went to the woman still sprawled on the Dead King's throne, to get us to kill each other until no one was left and victory landed bloody in her lap.

"You're right," the White Knight finally said.

And it was a load off my shoulders.

"We can't win by beating her here," I said. "She can't die and even if we drive her away she'll keep at this. Find a way to sow ruin while we try to recover after the war, push us over the edge."

"She has to be bound," Akua softly said.

And I held both Fetters in my hands, the rings of copper and bronze that would be put on once and never taken off. The Intercessor idly strummed her lute, still tuned from her song earlier, and smiled at me.

"Ah, and now we get to the good part," she said. "Are you coming to be bind me, Catherine?"



"You're the last relic left, Yara," I told her, stepping forward. "It's time for you to be buried with the rest."

A flash of rage distorted that pretty tanned face, turning it ugly, but it was gone in an instant. I waded past corpses fresh and old, past broken stone and the Dead King's remains.

"And that's for you to decide?" she asked.

"I am the Warden," I simply replied, and Creation echoed of the word.

She only smiled.

"Not the right kind," she told me. "We made sure of that."

"**Silence**," I ordered, stepping forward.

And then the Intercessor laughed.

"Try the other one, your third," she told me. "The one we made sure you'd come into before this moment. *See what happens.*"

And dread seized me, because in that moment I understood what she'd done. I had my three aspects, one formed to bring about the end of the Dead King himself. My Role was settled, seared into Creation as loudly as triumphantly as a Role ever had been. And it was not the Role of a jailer, for all that my Name could hold the meaning.

"Yeah," Yara gently said, "you lost before you even started."

I'd fallen for the oldest trap: you put two choices in front of someone and forced them to choose so that they might never realize there was a third. If I'd had an aspect to spare, if there had still been room for my Role to settle... Instead I'd chosen between **Guide** and **Sentence**, as it'd never occurred to me I could refuse to choose at all. *No, that's arrogance*, I told myself. *We wouldn't have killed the Dead King without my last aspect.* If I'd chosen nothing we would have lost, and the Bard gotten her way again.

"I win," Yara of Nowhere smiled, "or I win, or I win. That's the only kind of game worth playing, Catherine."

If I used the Fetters on her, they wouldn't work. I knew that with sudden, ironclad certainty. I didn't have the right weight behind me. It couldn't be me, and I'd not made much of a case for Hanno. He could and would offer, I knew that, but in the end he was below me. My subordinate. It was an ill-fitting match, and I could try to fit it in the story of an unkillable Evil being imprisoned by a hero through worthy sacrifice, but Yara had headed me off there already. *I am providence made flesh*, she'd claimed, and I had not contested it.

I was at a loss.

Wind brushed past me and a streak of darkness hit the Bard's arm as she let out a yelp of pain, burrowing through the stained leather and sinking into the flesh. I glanced back to see Akua approaching, a cold look on her face, and Hanno looking at her with disapproval. It was easy to see why, since one of Yara's arms had withered dry. It looked like a mummified husk, though the Intercessor looked more amused than anything.

"Well, you made sure not to kill me," she drawled. "Feeling better, oh mighty Sahelian?"

Akua brushed past me, armour whispering against mine, and cocked her head to the side.

"Slightly," she said. "But I am not finished."

"Enough," Hanno said, drawing my eye to him. "Torture will accomplish nothing and is unworthy of-"

There was no longer a sheath at his hip, I idly noticed. He must have lost it at some point in the fighting, though it hardly mattered since the Severance would not have fit it. It cut too deeply to... I clenched my fingers then unclenched them. The Saint of Swords and once cut my aspect domain, using Sever. The same aspect we'd made into the blade. *So it still should be capable of that, with the right guidance.* The first time I'd reached for my third aspect, Masego was forced to cut it out of me. The second time it mixed with Winter, became a domain that was not entirely mine. I had a precedent, a pattern forming, and most of all a story to ride.

I had never been above mutilating myself to win.

"Hanno," I said, cutting through whatever he'd been saying. "I need you to do something for me."

"Catherine?" he asked.

I paused a moment, choosing my words so I could ask him to cut my third aspect out of me in a way he would not refuse. It was the mutilation of my soul, but it was also a way out of the trap I had fallen into. Like the fox in the trap, I would eat through my leg rather than perish. Without Sentence, my Name was once more incomplete. It'd be damaged, my legitimacy in my Role diminished. I'd be misaligned. And though I would make myself into a bastard thing, it would be a bastard thing that might just be able to fetter the Intercessor. That was how you killed a god, wasn't it? By making another.

And I would destroy who I was until I became what was needed to win.

My mouth opened to speak, but Akua interrupted me with a sigh.

"You're bleeding yourself again, aren't you?" she asked.

I refused to meet her eyes, the accusing gold.

"I used to admire that in you, darling, did you know?" Akua told me. "Your willingness to destroy yourself to win."

"It's not pretty," I said, "but it works."

I forced myself to look at her then, truly look at her. We were no longer the girls we'd been at seventeen, worn down by war and grief and the scars of the lessons we'd learned, but I could look at Akua Sahelian today and see in her the shade of the girl I'd first glimpsed sitting across my father in a tent. The same tall hourglass figure, sharp aristocratic cheekbones and deep golden eyes. Changed by time, all of them, but the roots were unchanged. I'd thought her stunning before I learned to hate her, and I still thought it now that I'd learned not to. She was in armour, her face touched with grime and the lingering stiffness of the Dead King's curse, and yet I could still understand why as a girl I'd thought her the most beautiful person I'd ever seen.

"I have learned," Akua Sahelian gently smiled, "not to settle for that."

And the circlet of copper and bronze she had stolen from me sunk into her wrist, the first of the Fetters bound. An exclamation of dismay ripped itself free of my throat, scraping it raw. I reached for her but she shook me off, and the words I was chewing on were drowned out by the Intercessor's mocking laughter.

"You?" she guffawed. "Come on, Doom of Liesse. My dearest folly. You think taking the fall for Catherine because you love her will be enough? Love's never enough, child."

She leaned forward in her throne, blue eyes burning.

"Stop wasting our time," Yara of Nowhere said. "You still keep to Below, and just because you've learned that other people are *people* doesn't make you redeemed."

A wide, nasty smile greeted Akua's unflinching approach. She held, I saw, the second Fetter in her hand. I jerked forward, a spasm of the heart, but before I could finish the step Hanno's hand caught my arm. His eyes were kind, but they were also firm. I turned away, chewing on my lip.

"You're not dying either, I made sure of that," the Intercessor said. "It's not a way out for you, you don't get anything out of it."

"You are," Akua Sahelian idly said, "a liar."

Yara blinked.

"I assure you, you're not dy-"

"You called yourself luck," Akua said, "but that is a lie, Intercessor. You are not a blind roll of the dice. *You take sides.*"

"I've helped both sides of the Game," the Intercessor dismissed, "I-"

"You help Good," Akua said. "When you have the choice, that is the truth of you. Providence made flesh is the truth of you, Yara of Nowhere, because you are the golden luck of heroes."

"You're quibbling," Yara snorted. "You'd bind me with a complaint?"

"Not to *you*," Akua Sahelian smiled. "To your masters, for all that you know so do they. And through you I give grievance, for your game is *unfair*. How can it be a true wager, when your own Intercessor favours a side?"

The Intercessor went very, very still.

"You don't know what you're doing, girl," she hoarsely whispered. "If you had any idea-"

And we felt it all, then. The weight. The *attention*. Akua Sahelian had called on the Gods, and the Gods listened.

"Fortune and misfortune," she said. "Providence and calamity. It takes two to make it even."

She leaned forward and the Intercessor scrabbled back on the throne, lute dropping on the ground and snapping a string as the silver flask toppled over the edge and began spilling liquor all over the floor. Dark red, like blood. But there was nowhere to run, and the Fetter slid around her wrist.

Its lettering burned bright, for the barest of moments, and then it sank beneath her skin.

"No," Yara shouted. "*NO*. You can't-"

Akua struck her across the mouth, shattering teeth as the Intercessor fell on the tiles. She spasmed there, crawling and going away.

"I simply cannot abide screaming," Akua told her. "You will have to learn that if we are to be colleagues."

Yara kept crawling away, bleeding from the mouth, and as Hanno finally released my arm I rushed forward. Gods but my leg hurt.

Akua only half-turned towards me, but it was enough. I swept her in my arms, her armour rough against mine, and though I had to dip her backwards I found her mouth. It should have been hard and wanting, after too many years of denial, but it wasn't. It was... soft. And yet the yearning would not leave me, or her, and it felt unbearable to part even when I had to suck in a trembling breath.

"Ah," Akua faintly said. "So that's what it feels like."

"I was," I began, but then choked on the words. "I couldn't..."

"I know," she murmured against my cheek. "I know. We are who we are."

"I wasn't going to ask you to," I admitted.

"I wouldn't have, if you did," Akua said. "It's my choice, Catherine. I saw what I could be, and though it is not a penance..."

She half-smiled.

"I have learned lessons," she said. "And instead of letting them join me in the grave made of Liesse, I would teach them with the villains that will follow in my wake."

My heart clenched.

"She might not let you," I whispered. "Neither of you can nudge if the other doesn't allow it."

"So we will have to bargain," Akua softly laughed. "Else we will be nothing at all."

From the corner of my eye I saw Hanno kneeling by Yara's side, Light glowing around his hand, and I realized that he was healing her. She'd just tried to kill us all, to kill all of Calernia, and yet Hanno of Arwad knelt besides the woman in pain and tried to help her.

It was, I thought, the essence of the man.

Akua drew away and though I resisted I did not force her to stay. She took a step back, watching my face, and something like grief flicked across her face.

"Finish it," she quietly asked.

Cold dread filled my stomach.

"You can't really be asking me that," I said.

"We will only know for certain it has worked after," Akua said.

"That's not what I meant," I replied.

"I know," she smiled. "But for our parting, my love, perhaps it is my turn to be allowed to wield the cruelty."

I could have argued. I could have screamed and railed and refused, but all it would have done was mar this. A moment neither of us would get back. So instead I paid my dues, my long price, and drew the knife that'd killed my father.

"I love you," I said.

It had never admitted it to her before. I likely never would again.

"And I you, my heart," Akua said, eyes golden like the sun. "Farewell."

And I killed her, like she'd asked me. Plunged the knife into her heart, parting flesh, until she leaned forward to gently kiss me and let out a soft gasp against my lips. She died, and in the instant she did she was gone. So was the Intercessor, the other side of that now forever spinning coin. Hanno rose to his feet, face solemn, as behind us Masego let out a loud gasp. Sorcery billowed out, light filling the hall and rising through the tower like a shining star as the Hierophant finished forging his godhead. It was over, I thought, touching my cheek and finding tears there. I closed my eye and leaned against my staff, feeling the last of my strength leave me.

We'd won.

We'd lost.

So began the Age of Order.

## Epilogue I

*"Why did the Black Queen invade Keter?"*

*She'd run out of living to tax."*

*– Overheard in a Laure tavern*

Cordelia was dying.

Every ragged, rasping breathed told her of that truth. Too much of her throat was gone, devoured by a ghoull even as she killed it. Distantly she heard the buzz of Light coming down, feeling a sliver of cold satisfaction that the Blessed Artificer's wall had kept the dead away from the ealamal until the end. Her pride had not slain Calernia. Was Alaya alive? She did not know, and her mind was slipping. Darkness crept in from the edges, closing in

on all sides. Her breath rattled out, a groan, and the last of the princess' life began to leave her. *A good death*, she thought.

Soft fingers were laid against her forehead. There was a shiver and her life stalled, as if caught in her throat.

"Am I too early or too late, I wonder?" Ivah of the Losara mused. "Many will grieve that you are not to be brought into the Night."

She tried to move, to raise her hand, but it would not move.

"We see you, Cordelia Hasenbach," the Lord of Silent Steps said, its voice echoing with two others. "You who offered peace to the Firstborn and meant it, who would welcome us into these Burning Lands as an ally."

Coolness, fresh and pure and so intense as to be almost painful, flooded her veins as her body was wracked with spasms.

"We are the children of the Ever Dark," the silver-eyed drow told her, "but we have learned our lessons. Steel shall be answered with steel, but you who offered good faith will see it returned in kind."

Cordelia let out a hoarse shout, hands rising as she convulsed upwards and caught the Firstborn's shoulder. The cold was fading, and though she was not healed neither was she *dying*.

"It is done," Ivah of the Losara murmured. "Death will not have you today."

The princess breathed out, leaning her head on its shoulder. Exhausted even though she had done nothing.

"Maybe," Cordelia panted out, "tomorrow."

And like a seizure, a banner flown in the face of grief, twin laughter sounded in the tent.

—

Night had fallen over Keter but even past midnight the dark was yet kept at bay.

Thousands of torches and bonfires burned across the Crown of the Dead, the great army that now stood mistress of it gone wild with victory. Casks of beer and liquor rolled down the streets, singing filled the winding streets and it was as if the very seat of horror had turned into a summer fair. Everywhere soldiers shouted and laughed and bickered in a dozen different tongues, old feuds forgotten for a night as all celebrated the end of the Dead King. It was a sight like none other: Alamans nobles sharing Levantine liquor with Soninke mfuasa, orc and Firstborn poets trading tirades with Arlesites over prizes of Callowan ale.

Lycaonese and Levantines belting our ribald songs, Taghreb – even the new High Lady of Kahtan herself! – joining the impromptu Barber and Edward play mounted by Callowans and goblins.

There might never be a night like this again, they all knew deep down, and so they roared all the louder for it.

In the shadow of broken flying fortresses the great pyre for the dead was burning low, eclipsed by the bonfires of the living on the great avenues where cattle roasted and a thousand cooks from all over Calernia filled plates for whoever put them on the table. It was a night for life winning over death so it was no surprise that a thousand couples were born in dark corners. For a night, a few or even years to come. Wise heads opened the stocks of tangleroot brew for any who wanted it, intending to avoid accidents, but some bellies were bound to swell in coming months anyway. It was a night for rash decisions, the release of years and hopelessness – revelry sublimating all the horror of the war against Keter into a life without the Dead King's shadow hanging over them all.

In the heart of the city, though, a handful gathered in a small room inside the black spire as the clamour of the festivities echoed from a distance. It was a distinguished company, the kind whose absence might have been noticed had merry chaos not seized the city outside. The Warden and the White Knight, two pillars of the age to come. Dented from the struggles of the day but yet standing. With them came three that would have seemed mismatched, if not for the clear ease between them: Vivienne Dartwick, the Princess, Indrani the Ranger and the Hierophant himself. Who did not seem so different, at first glance, for all that he was said to have reached apotheosis. Still tall and thin, long braids woven with trinkets going down his back, and his eyes were yet one of flesh and the other of glass.

Only now it was not the fires of Summer that glinted beneath the eye cloth but something else, a vision of miracles and revelations whose very sight would madden the unready. And there was something else, in the way the world moved around him. It was as if he moved free of the current, only faintly touched by Creation's laws – the way his robes sometimes moved when there was no wind and went still when there was, the lack of footsteps on ash and the way no dust ever seemed to cling to him.

Before all five of them an orc lay on a bed, his breathing laboured

Hakram Deadhand, born to the Howling Wolves Clan. Once the Adjutant, now the Warlord. Though victory had been won, or the so the clamour outside claimed, two evils yet lay in him. One was horror in the mundane, the spine cracked by the Prince of Bones' hand that now stilled his limbs. Light healing had made the wound livable, but little more. Sorcerous healing of so fine a thing



was beyond the ken of any on Calernia save perhaps the finest mage-doctors of Ashur. None were here. And so instead the Warden had sent for another.

"It was a wound taken defeating the Prince of Bones," Hanno of Arwad quietly said. "It is a tragedy, Warden, but I do not know if it is..."

"Unjust?" Catherine Foundling finished, fingers clenching.

It was a powerful boon, Undo. The stuff legends were made of. But like all legends, it had been dealt into hands that would not abuse it: the White Knight could not unmake what he did not see as unjust, and he was a rare kind of man. The kind that dying so others might not, the bloody pyre of heroism. Many of the Named that had died in Keter, most of them, would remain in the grave. It was not unjust to die willingly for something greater than yourself.

"He didn't die," the Warden said. "Instead they hurt him, White Knight, and did it where it'd cut deepest. He only just got out of that chair and now they put him back into it. For good."

The dark-skinned man met her gaze, his face a calm contrast to her stormy one.

"He's done so much to keep this continent standing that no one but a handful of scholars will ever know about," she told him. "We both know how the world works, Hanno. In the books he'll be the Warlord like it's all he ever was, because that story fits. It's cleaner. The rest will get swept under the rug, and they'll just remember him as a footnote – the first Warlord in ages, broken in Keter. End of the tale."

Her face clenched with fury and grief.

*"He deserves better."*

Hanno of Arwad did not answer, though he was brave enough not to shy from her burning gaze. The White Knight was not a man whose convictions were easily moved. And yet he stepped back, when instead of trying tirade or persuasion the Black Queen of Callow got down on her knee. Catherine Foundling was a proud woman, it was known. She had held to the bone of that pride ever since, as a girl, her father had taken into the heart of an empire and the mighty had knelt around them he had told her of a way to live: *we do not kneel*. Her father's truth, one he had lived and died by. Refusing compromise even in the face of death, unbending for anything or anyone.

But Catherine went down on her knee, because she was more than her father's daughter and Hakram Deadhand mattered more to her than pride.

"Please," she asked. "I know there are others as deserving, that you only get once day."

Her fingers clenched.

"And still," she said. "*Please.*"

And Hanno of Arwad let conviction move him, offering a hand then another. The first to bring her back to her feet, shamed she had ever knelt before him, and the second laid on the Warlord's side. **Undo.** Creation shivered, then the White Knight let out a small breath as he stepped away. The Hierophant replaced him, weaving an incantation, and after his eye ceased moving around he pulled back to give the others a nod.

"His body is in perfect condition save for the limbs cut by the Severance," he said.

The Warden and the White Knight matched gazes for a long moment, Catherine Foundling dipping her head into a nod that said much without need for words. Hanno returned it.

"I'll see you outside," he said.

"Might be you will," she agreed.

And with a mute goodbye at the Princess, Hanno of Arwad left the small room where he had brought a miracle. He was not one of the Woe, and the last evil that lay in Hakram Deadhand's body was not the kind to be beheld by outsiders. The orc began to stir awake as the White Knight closed the door behind him, Hierophant still standing by his bedside. Hakram woke feverish and befuddled, as if did not recognize where he was. His vision swam into focus, coming to Catherine, and tension left him.

"Cat," he gravelled. "Where are we?"

Her jaw clenched.

"Keter," she told him, hoping.

The Dead King's curse had been a mind-killer, but only half of it had reached him. Vivienne had caught the other. The confusion on the tall orc's face deepened, to the horror of the others.

"What is the last thing you remember?" Masego briskly asked.

"Heading for the Arsenal," Hakram told them. "Would someone get me out of these bindings, they-"

And the horror on his face when he saw the limbs lost to the Severance was like a blow to the stomach for them all. He fought to master his face, but the anguish was too deep and sudden to be smoothed away.

"I," he began, then his voice broke. "How much did I lose?"

"Two years," Indrani said.

"There might be more," Masego said. "It is too early to tell."

"It should have been less," Vivienne bit out. "I caught the spell, it-"

Her words caught his eye, and the way he stiffened did not go unseen by any of them.

"You don't remember who I am, do you?" Vivienne Dartwick softly asked.

Hakram shook his head, the hint of shame on his face burning the rest of them like acid. The Princess swallowed thickly, blue-grey eyes turning to Hierophant.

"There has to be a way," she said. "You told us the curse is still in him, why can't you purge it?"

"It is," Hierophant simply said, "the Dead King's work."

Even from the grave, Trismegistus King's will was not to be easily overwrit.

"There's always a way, with curses," Catherine Foundling said. "You taught me that. The magic fails if there's not a way out."

"It has a price," Hierophant said. "And it will not bring everything back."

"But most," Catherine pressed.

"Most," he conceded.

And the Warden stepped forward, but a hand was laid on her arm and she found Vivienne Dartwick's gaze had turned to steel.

"No," Princess said. "Not this time. Let me."

Neither woman gave, but eventually the Warden was the one to look away. Vivienne knelt by the bed, Masego's hand on her shoulder, and faced a hesitant Hakram.

"You don't remember me, right now," she told him, "but I haven't forgotten. There's a debt between us, Hakram Deadhand."

"I cannot call on it," he replied.

"You don't have to," she said.

And Hierophant's other hand came to rest atop the orc's head, his flesh eye finding Princess' own to seek one last confirmation. A

simple nod and magic billowed out like the wind. Currents of it, thick and visible to the naked eye as faint blue trails, as Hierophant bound them all together. It was not a spell, not in the way he had been taught as a boy, but something simpler. Will exercised on the world, the purest manifestation of what he had hoped to become. And through that binding, he drew out the curse as one would a poison. It fought and wriggled and tried to sink its hooks deep, but inch by inch it was drawn out of Hakram Deadhand and into the only place it could be.

Vivienne Dartwick let out a shuddering breath, accepting it whole as she closed her eyes.

The magic ebbed low, then guttered out entirely. Hierophant's hand retreated and Hakram suddenly clutched his forehead as he let out a roar of pain. Fangs drawing blood from his own lips, he shook wildly until the fit passed and a light returned to his gaze that had been gone. It lit up the room, reflected in the others around him as their hopes soared and he let out a wounded noise at the sight of the Princess.

"Vivienne," he said. "Gods, Vivienne, what have you-"

The Princess of Callow let out a rasping laugh, eyes opening as the curse's foul magic flared.

"My turn," she said. "The choice came, Hakram."

The curse boiled out, Vivienne Dartwick's left hand turning to ash until there was not even bone left above her wrist.

"And I judge you well worth a hand," she finished.

Looking more fragile than anyone had ever seen him, Hakram let out a grieving curse and drew her into his arms. It was as if a dam had broken, all of them coming together onto the sickbed in a pile of limbs clutching the others tight. The Warden rested her chin atop Indrani's head and breathed in raggedly. For the first time since she had left the Dead King's all, it felt over. Finally over.

"Alive," Catherine Foundling whispered.

Crippled and lost, a parade of the mangled, but they had gone through the storm and all five of them come out the other side breathing.

When she finally let herself weep in relief, she was not alone.

—

There'd been talk of having the ceremony at dawn but when faced with the very real possibility that most of the Grand Alliance would be too hungover to show up common sense prevailed.

It would be held at noon instead, which still ended up requiring the shepherding of a great many nobles and soldiers still quite drunk. The Plaza of Five Palaces, a soldier's sobriquet given during the dark hours of fighting at the foot of the black spire since the Keteran name for it was anyone's guess, remained beautiful even after the previous night's festivities. It had to be cleared out and cleaned but there was no lack of willing hands for the work, for who didn't love a wedding? Besides, Razin Tanja and Aquiline Osenia had become beloved figures beyond even Levant as much for their war record as their open affection for one another.

Guests began arriving an hour before the ceremony, and some soon realized this was to be the most highly attended wedding in the history of Levant. Though the Champion's Blood had no one sitting for them, foreign guests were the most prestigious of perhaps any wedding on Calernia. The First Princess of Procer and every last remaining – recognized – royal of that realm, the queen and princess of Callow, the Empress of Aenia and representatives from every single city of the League, the chancellor of the Confederation of Praes and even the first Warlord of the Clans in several hundred years.

A dash of the exotic was added by the presence of General Rumena and a handful of sigil-holders as well as the Herald of the Deeps and his generals, then a dash of the legendary through the presence of Kreios Riddle-Maker and the last living spellsingers. Had the elves not disappeared without a word, every realm of Calernia would have had someone in attendance.

The Dominion's ways were not as elaborate as those of some other realms, but no less eye-catching for it. Razin Tanja and Aquiline Osenia arrived not in dresses or fine clothes but naked from the waist up, painted entirely in the colours of their Blood: red and grey for the Binder's Blood, green and bronze for the Slayer's. The paints were a work of art, the most skillful hands in Levant having helped shape the elaborate patterns even though it was the betrothed who had themselves applied it as was tradition. The two of them were a sight, black-haired and handsome Lord Razin smiling softly at slender, lethal Lady Aquiline.

The crowd, made up mostly of guests and Levantines but swelled with thousands of curious soldiers from every stripe and banner, went wild at the sight of them. It felt like spitting on the Dead King's grave, for the young couple to come to stand before the black spire and exchanged their elaborate wedding knives. A tall and bearded Lantern bound their hands together with hemp rope and they cut their way out with the knives, emerging from the common trial wed in the eyes of Gods and men. The two of them kissed with enthusiasm that had the crowd roaring once more, and it was a done thing. Many of them, in some way, knew they were looking at more than just a wedding.

Razin and Aquiline embraced each other under a sunny sky, in the heart of Keter, and it was the first step towards the end of the Dominion. It was the first step towards what would come after, for good or ill, but with the sun so bright and the sky so blue no one thought much of the ill.

—

On the night of the wedding, after the banquet was over and the festivities had ignited all over the city again, a somber few assembled in the palace known as the Garden of Crowns. A great sprawl of greenery and stone, it had been chosen for its silence and beauty. The Revenant that had guarded it was long gone, so in the stillness of the Garden graves had been dug. For all that the day had been the domain of life clawed back from death, with dusk came death's dues.

And there were many of them to pay.

Named were lowered into graves, some who had in life been loved and others hated but who were now all honoured in death. The pillars of the Truce and Terms, Ishaq Deathless and Hanno of Arwad, did not intrude into private the private griefs of the Named assembled before them but they spoke of the commonality binding them all.

"In the face of the end of times," the White Knight said, "we came together. We made accord, where never before had there been so great an accord between Named sworn to Above and Below."

"We're past the storm," the Barrow Sword said. "We lived through it, and now that we have what kept us together will fade. The Liesse Accords will not be the same rules that bound us through this war."

Struggle between Named would begin anew, the Game of the Gods returned. Rules of engagement would bind it as they had not before, but steel would come out once more.

"But those who died here died for more than just Calernia's survival," the White Knight said. "They proved that, when the storm comes, we can stand together. That there is a line between doom and the world, that we all stand on the same side of it."

Eyes went to the Warden, who stood silent by the Ranger's side along with Hierophant and the Warlord, but she said nothing. She had not been the captains of these Named, at the end, and so it was not her place to speak. Hers would be the world that came after, not the funeral of the old one.

"It might be that call won't come again in our lifetime," the Barrow Sword said. "And perhaps we'll never see the likes of this war again. But if the time comes, if horror rises again..."

"There will be a truce," the White Knight said.

"There will be terms," the Barrow Sword continued.

"And when we beat back that storm, the victory of that day will have been bought by those we bury here."

A murmur of agreement, like a shiver in the air. Respected men, both of them, but there was more to it than that. For all the grief that clung strongly to the air in this Garden of Crowns, there was a hard sort of pride as well. They had beaten death, in the end. They stood over the sacrifices, of which there had been too many because there were always too many, but they had won.

And so the world changed.

The crowd broke up, coming apart into half a hundred small burials. Some gathered many grieving, Alexis the Silver Huntress' not only bringing the last two survivors of Refuge but also many who had liked her or fought at her side. Others were small things, like the Hunted Magician's who only earned a single faded flower from the Artificer and the Blacksmith each before he was put to the ground. Sobs filled the night, away from the laughter and merriment that still held much of the city around them, and quietly the lost were given their dues until there was only one left. In a silent corner, standing far from all save Hanno of Arwad, Kreios the Riddle-Maker buried his daughter.

He looked old, and his grief was the grief of all the world.

—

They celebrated the victory for five days and nights.

The festivities lost their edge of desperation as time went on, the disbelieving tinge that came with having survived the end times becoming a sort of jubilant savagery instead. There could be no corraling soldiers finally releasing all the tension and terror of the war on Keter, especially not when the sergeants and captains that might have tried were part of the hollering crowds. Wisely, no such order was given as the leaders of the Grand Alliance and its allies — historians had already begun to wrestle with the turn of phrase, looking to avoid the repetition and make a name for themselves by picking the one that'd stick — instead rode out the wave. By the sixth morning ale rations had run out and the stashes of contraceptive herbs were running dangerously low, which wound down the merrymaking more efficiently than a thousand shouting sergeants might have.

Armies began to put themselves together again, staggering back to the parts of the city where their banners had been raised. It was slow-going, and though it was rumoured that High Marshal Nim had wanted to hurry it along by sounding the gathering horns and

threatening the lash for those who dragged their feet it was also said that Chancellor Alaya had intervened against it. Instead it was stretched out for another day, though soon there were enough soldiers back in the ranks that the work of preparing the departures could begin. Though with continued dwarven support there was no risk of running out of supplies and indeed the Herald of the Deeps invited the hosts to remain as long as they wished – a pretty gesture that some, perhaps cynically, suggested might not be unrelated to the fact that most the Kingdom of the Dead outside Keter and its outskirts remained swarming with undead – for some of them the war was not yet over.

The Principate of Procer had been saved from utter annihilation, but it was still a broken realm of which large swaths were yet occupied by roving corpses.

That knowledge was enough to sour the Proceran forces, often the rowdiest, on the thought of agitating to rest longer in Keter before marching away. With so many officers dead, the camps ravaged and some soldiers still missing even the most disciplined of the armies found it impossible to leave in good time, so compromise was reached. The hosts would leave through Arcadia in waves, the first of which would leave on the morrow: the eighth day since the fall of Keter. Which brought one last matter to the fore, an old promise it was time to fulfill. Though summons were only sent to the Army of Callow and a few of the kingdom's allies, once word trickled out into the ranks there was no stopping the tide. It was, after all, to be a historic event. The kind you got to boast to your grandchildren of having been at.

Some of the nobles thought it a strange choice, to choose the ashen ruin of a breach over a more majestic site like the Dead King's black spire or the Plaza of Five Palaces where the great Levantine wedding had taken place, but none who knew either of the two women. No matter how high Callow's red-handed goddess of victory had risen, she had never quite gotten the mud off her boots – and oh, how her soldiers loved her for it. Even now, even still, for what else could you offer the woman who had led you to triumph against the King of Death himself? And Vivienne Dartwick, though crowned and heroine twice over, had never shaken the old urge to take to rooftops at night. Princess she might be, but she had once been a thief and not since learned squeamishness.

Besides, the both of them faintly understood something. That the moment where the Army of Callow had crossed the chasm, threw its defiance in the Enemy's teeth and shattered the hold of the dark, had been the end of a tale. One Callow told itself about itself, a tale of bloody victories and long prices and a kingdom earning back the pride it had lost in the Conquest. And just as faintly, they understood – had for years, one way or another – that this tale could not last forever. Must not, lest Callow break itself upon the world again and again, just as surely as Praes once had



and still might. And so they would honour that tale, but they would also bury it.

Near a hundred thousand were crammed in the streets and houses, atop rooftops and through ruins. A platform had been raised and greats of the era stood besides it, Named and rulers alike. The hallowed survivors of the war on Keter were resplendent in their armour and finery, but it was not to be their day. It belonged only to the two women on the heights, who had not even sent for a priest.

Princess Vivienne Dartwick stood resplendent in a long dress of Fairfax blue, pale accents evoking the rays of a sun radiating from the neckline. Her missing hand was replaced with a wooden one covered by a white glove. She wore little jewelry save for a silver bracelet, her hair made up in the same milkmaid's braid that had become her signature, but as thousands beheld her none of them would have thought her born as anything but royalty. Behind her stood two veiled banners, held up by knights of the Order of the Stolen Crown.

Queen Catherine Foundling wore black and steel. A soldier queen she had been and would be, wearing scarred plate over a black tunic. The eye she had lost to the Hawk was covered by black eye cloth, down her back went the famous Mantle of Woe and in her hand she held a dreadful staff of dead yew. The sole jewelry she wore was the crown she had been anointed with in Laure, when she stole a kingdom back from Praes after the Folly. She needed nothing else.

The ceremony was, in the end, a simple enough thing. The Black Queen stood before her soldiers, the rest of the world behind them, and told them true.

"I took my crown," Catherine Foundling said, "to fight a war."

Boots on stone, shields and swords rattling. Not only from her own but also from the rest of this grand army, for love or hate none would deny that the Black Queen had brought them to this day.

"It took us far and wide, that war," she said. "East and west, north and south, until we reached the edge of the world and brought doom to the King of Death himself."

Cheers and shouts, the sky itself rattling from the noise of it. She waited until it wound down, letting it wash over her.

"We won it," the Black Queen said. "Keter has fallen and with it we brought an end to the Age of Wonders."

The crowd roared again. It passed.

"I took my crown to fight a war," Catherine Foundling repeated, "and that war is over."

Slowly, almost regretfully, she reached for the crown on her head. It was as if a spell had been cast over all the city, for a pin could have been heard dropping and none dared to move. None save one: as the Black Queen removed her crown, Vivienne Dartwick stepped forward.

"We'll have peace now," the Warden promised the world. "And I have been war's queen. Peace will need another."

And a roar answered, for though never had Catherine Foundling been more beloved of her people than after this last victory, they loved peace even more and Vivienne Dartwick stood for that. The roar drowned out the entire world, as the princess of Callow smoothly knelt and her queen crowned her. Vivienne rose a queen, and Creation whispered in a quickening perhaps in time a Queen, as the tale of the Black Queen of Callow came to an end. The Warden stepped back, from the kingdom and the stage, leaving both in Queen Vivienne's hands. The queen's face was calm and bright, smiling patiently until the shouting ebbed low, and only then did she speak.

"It would be easier," Queen Vivienne said, "to look only forward. To chase the sun and leave the grim years we fought through behind us."

She shook her head.

"It would be easier," she told the world, "but we have not come so far by choosing what it easy."

She stood tall under the sun in a way that had nothing to do with height, blue and pale and every inch a queen.

"I will not forget that the crown I now bear was forged in mud and blood," Vivienne Dartwick said, voice high and clear, "that tomorrow we will get to stand the warmth of the sun because of the hard decisions made in yesterday's darkness."

And behind her, the woman who had crowned her went still as stone.

"We made mistakes. Great and small, tragic and laughable. Ours was a long, hard road and more than once we lost our way."

They did not look at each other, but it was a conversation between the two anyhow.

"But I will not deny that road. I will not forget it, try to bury it out of sight," Vivienne said, and there she finally met her friend's eye. "I may regret the mistakes but not the journey."

Something passed between them, too intricate to be simply called love but no less shining for it.

"For that, I feel only pride."

The queen turned back to the other woman's red-rimmed eye.

"It was an orphan, a Foundling, that led us to the edge of the world and brought us back. I'll not let another name steal that deed."

The crowd breathed in.

"House Foundling will rule Callow," Queen Vivienne said. "I will bear the name, as will those who come after me, and we *will not forget*."

The crowd breathed out, its roaring approval a wall of sound that seemed like it beat back even the wind.

A gesture from the queen and the knights revealed the two banners. The queen's personal arms were unchanged, a white sun on Fairfax blue. But the royal standard, the Sword and Crown, had changed. A silver sword and crown had once been held in balance on it, the sword weighing heavier. Beneath them an old claim had still been writ, *justifications only matter to the just*. No longer. The sword and crown stood even, one no greater than the other, and the words had been cut short.

*Only to the just*, it simply claimed, as in the Book of All Things.

"We lived through the end times," Queen Vivienne smiled, bright as sun above her. "Now what comes after is ours to make."

## Epilogue II

*"At the end, there will be more than the Gods.*

*With the Last Dusk will come the passing of Creation, discording turning to concord as the wager of Fate is resolved. Yet it shall not be the end of everything, for though all came of the emptiness of Void to create is to make something from nothing. That is our gift, and so the sum of the choices we have made will echo beyond the bounds of time.*

*In the end, we are told, they will all have mattered."*

*– Last page of the Book of All Things*

The valley, they told Catherine, was called the Knightsgrave.

It was a pretty sight, tall grass split by a burbling mountain spring whose banks grew thick with red flowers. That was not unusual, in the Red Flower Vales – which in these parts the native Procerans called the Vermillion Valleys – but the mage tower surrounded by a few cottages was. Half a dozen wizard families and twice that in simple students had made their home in the Knightsgrave, a small hidden school of wizardry in the mountains. The temple built by the cottages made it plain that the House of Light was keeping on them, but both the brother there and the magistrate in nearby Beaumaraais knew and approved of the school.

Neither recognized that they were being visited by the Warden and the White Knight until they were told, and quickly acceded to silence when it was asked of them. Borders were still being drawn, after all, but Beaumaraais might well be part of the lands ceded to Cardinal before the year was out.

The burial of the Rogue Sorcerer, Roland de Beaumaraais, attracted something of a crowd. Magistrate Alisanne handled the early arrangements, but then turned the affair over to Brother Albert. Catherine Foundling had known many a shade of grief over her years, both hers and that of others, so she did not ask why the beautiful grey-eyed woman could not stand to look at the coffin. Roland had said there would be a woman in Beaumaraais and there was no need to ask who she might be.

It was a simple but heartfelt service. Brother Albert did not take up too much of the talking, ceding the place instead to Roland's father – his last living parent, after his mother's death two years past from the green fever – who spoke of the light there had been in his son since he'd been a child, of how proud he was that he had gone out into the world to chase the murderer of his brother Olivier. Roland the Beaumaraais, it seemed, was something of a local hero. He'd fought off an evil wizard as a teenager, rumoured to be a Praesi warlock, and founded the small wizard school.

Magistrate Alisanne's eyes were hard as flint all through the service. Eyes turned to her several times, expectant, but she never spoke a word.

Hanno spoke instead, of the good he had seen Roland do and the love others yet bore for him. The eyes of the young wizards shone, when they heard of the company a man who'd once been a boy here had risen to keep. Of the people he had helped, the evils he had defeated. Catherine Foundling, when her turn came, spoke only two sentences.

"He took an arrow meant for me," she quietly said. "The debt I owe him is greater than words can convey."

Roland was buried by the banks of the spring among a bed of red flowers. A stele of stone was left to remember him by, simply reading: *Roland de Beaumaraais, the Rogue Sorcerer. A life spent for another is never wasted.* As dusk approached the crowd dispersed, heading back into town for the funerary banquet. The White Knight took a single look at the magistrate and the once-queen standing among red flowers before taking his leave with them, leaving them to the privacy of their grief.

"None of the people who came knew him," Magistrate Alisanne quietly said. "Most came to Beaumaraais after he left, attracted by rumours of the school."

"Not even his father?" the Warden asked.

A bitter smile answered.

"Especially not him," the magistrate replied.

Catherine Foundling was the keeper of many secrets, and so she did not ask why the other woman had insisted on a closed casket funeral when the body was well-preserved and had allowed none to gaze at the body. Roland had been a friend, one of the finest she'd ever had. She would not pry at his secrets while standing over his grave.

"I meant it," the Warden said, "when I said I owed him a debt. He spoke of you while dying."

The grey-eyed woman's face twisted with grief before she mastered herself. Only then did she answer the implicit offer.

"The rumours say that Cardinal grows by the day," she said.

"We're still laying the foundations," the Warden admitted. "Though houses have been raised for workers and officials."

It had been a year and a half since the fall of Keter, but work had only begun six months past. The Principate was dragging its feet recognizing the borders despite Cordelia's best efforts, though she had assured Catherine that it was not malfeasance. Part of the lands currently belonged to Orne, who had effectively declared independence during the Principate's collapse and had only loosely been brought back into the fold. First Princess Rozala could have pushed harder on the matter, but she already had too many demands on her time between the campaigns to recover the north and the negotiations with the secessionists in the south. Cardinal was at no risk of pulling blades and so very much down the list.

"Then perhaps I should go north," Magistrate Alisanne mused. "Our prince has called for officials to join the resettling of Brabant now that the verdant companies drove the dead from it."

"If that is your choice, I can put in a word for you," the Warden said. "Princess Beatrice is an old acquaintance; she would do me a small favour without thinking twice."

Princess Beatrice Volignac, who had formally abdicated all claim over Hainaut and pledged her army to the reconquest in exchange for the Highest Assembly granting her the principality of Brabant, was also in dire need of skilled officials. The ruling line of Brabant and its capital had both been wiped out, leaving the land in such brutal anarchy that the commoners were begging the orc mercenaries who'd driven back the dead to stay and settle in empty villages. Some were accepting, the Silver Letters had sent in their latest report to Cardinal, and there was already talk in Beatrice's court of inviting a goblin tribe to try to cut down on the costs of reconstructions. The roaring success of that gamble in Brus under the Kingfisher Princes was inviting imitation.

"And Iserre?" the magistrate idly said, tone gone teasing.

"Rozala Malanza's less likely to do me favours freely," the Warden drily replied, "but I could arrange something there too. I wouldn't advise heading there unless you want to see some fighting, though."

The grey-eyed woman's brow rose in surprise.

"Would it truly come to war so soon after the last?"

"Salamans is backing their own Milenan to contest Malanza's and they're not backing down," Catherine Foundling said. "They'll want to avoid open war with the Highest Assembly, but they want to use a civil war Iserre to break its southern ambitions."

Much of the south yet refuse to recognize Rozala Malanza as the legitimate First Princess, alleging in a fit of irony that she had usurped the good and rightful ruler of Procer – First Prince Cordelia Hasenbach. Using that pretext they were resisting being brough back into the Principate, though the real reasons were rather more pragmatic. Not only had the First Princess sworn to unseat every royal who had not sent armies to Keter but the Arlesite principalities had been the least hurt by the war and would be the first to recover. Few of them were enthusiastic at the prospect of being heavily taxed for the next fifty years to pay for the recovery of Procer's heartlands, the same Alamans princes that had been their rivals for power in Salia for centuries.

Only the swing of public opinion in favour of the First Princess since the victory in Keter had stopped war from erupting, but that would not last. Rozala Malanza was not as skilled a diplomat as her predecessor, for all that she was significantly more beloved of the people of Procer.

"I've never had a taste for war," Magistrate Alisanne finally said. "And that was before I lost him to it."

The grey-eyed woman shook her head, smiling at the grave.

"I should see, I think, what dream it is that he gave his life for," she decided. "Let it be Cardinal."

—

The opening of Cardinal College drew the greats of all Calernia.

Even after four years and fortunes spent Cardinal still looked like it was only half-done, but what *had* been done was spectacular. At the narrowing of the pass between Procer and Callow there had once been a fortress called the Bloody Twins, but the fighting of the Tenth Crusade – the duel between two dead legends, the Sovereign of Red Skies and Antigone Drakonslayer – had broken it and masses of stone been dropped from a Hell. Using the old fortress as a foundation and the fallen stone as materials, an army of stonemasons from the signatories to the Liesse Accords had begun to build the city.

Now two great square towers of grey stone rose as tall as the mountain they ate into, a great plaza passing between though they connected by a massive arched bridge – Concord Bridge, it was called – that stood half a league above the ground. From a distance the entire College looked like a gargantuan arch curving towards the clouds, and radiating outwards from it the bones of a city had been raised. Large avenues split the grounds like the lines on a sundial, districts swallowing the northern and southern valleys as tunnels were being carved through the mountains to bind the mountain-city together. Great swaths were still empty, but already a trading town on the Callowan side that heavy grain imports had driven demand had been founded and the districts around the College filled up.

The rest was yet as villages dotting the empty belly of a great city, workers come from abroad and migrants drawn by rumours of work taking up residence in clumps, but in time the city would fill itself. It might never be as large as Salia or Ater, the mountains would forbid such heedless growth, but in time it might become one of the great cities of Calernia regardless. Finishing to would be the work of decades yet, but already Cardinal had begun to pay for itself in part by collecting taxes in coin and food from its territories on both sides of the Whitecaps. It was a long way from no longer needing foreign coin to continue growing, but it would be provided for some years yet.

Besides, Chancellor Alaya and Empress Basilia had proved willing to sink a great deal more gold into the city than the Accords mandated. Not without concessions to show for it, of course, but negotiations with the seneschal of the city had not yielded as

much as they might have hoped. Lady Cordelia was yet one of the finest diplomats on the continent.

Guests had begun arriving a month before the ceremony was due, but the grand names only in the sennight before. The incoming tide of crowned heads excited even the already infamously blithe Cardinalians, who had seen so many great works of magic used to mundane building purposes that very little could yet shock them. Formal reception only took place when the last of the delegations arrived, in the grand plaza between the two towers of the College. It was a long, ceremonious affair where the delegations marched up the avenue one after another to be welcomed and only made less dull to behold for the crowds by how richly dressed the delegations were.

The Warden, head of the still mostly empty ruling council of Cardinal, gave out those welcomes with the other three sitting members. Lady Cordelia Hasenbach, seneschal of the city, who had also taken on diplomatic and judicial duties that would in time be beyond the office's remit when they could be distinguished from the administrative ones. Lady Pickler, intendant of works, who had already fallen into the habit of rarely attending any meeting that did not involve allocation of funds. And lastly General Grem One-Eye, the famous Praesi general who had quietly retired at the end of the War on Keter and taken the offer of commanding Cardinal's fledgling army.

The Lord Hierophant having adamantly refused the office of Rector of Cardinal College in favour of remaining a permanent Senior Lecturer, he had gotten out of attending. First Princess Rozala and her consort Louis Rohanon were welcomed first, a panoply of princes trailing behind them.

"They tell she might be pregnant with a second," the Warden muttered.

"It was only a matter of time," Lady Cordelia replied in a murmur. "She was trying as early as last year."

Catherine Foundling let out a low whistle.

"During that mess in Salamans?" she said. "Bold."

It had been a tense time, and if not for their intervention the situation might well have devolved into open war between the League and the Principate. In the wake of the First Princess' decisive victories in Iserre, Salamans had broken into civil war only for its south to be invaded by the Prince of Tenerife in a lightning march. He had then formally applied to join the League of Free Cities, throwing lit matches into tinder. Valencis had immediately pulled out of its negotiations with the Highest Assembly, making a marriage alliance with Tenerife instead, and when the First Princess had directly intervened in Salamans she'd



run into Tenerifan forces in the south that refused to cede the ground. An accidental skirmish turned into battle then drew Empress Basilia into the conflict, for though Tenerife could not be welcomed into the League in the Hierarch's absence it had status enough as an applicant to ask help of the Protector of the League.

With League armies camped a mere ten miles away from the Principate's in southern Salamans, there had been the scent of steel in the air.

The Warden's arbitration and a great deal of bargaining behind closed doors had helped tensions return to a simmer, but the miracle that put it to rest came in the form of Anaxares the Hierarch. Emerging from the Hells in the city of Orense, which even after being returned to the Proceran fold was holding out, he collapsed the siege and led the citizenry into declaring the independent Republic of Orense before the White Knight chased him off. With another fire in her backyard as the insurrection spread across the principality, the First Princess agreed to a partition of Salamans, ceding the northern half the Principate kept between Iserre and her own Aequitan.

In return she received an open guarantee that Valencis would never receive help from Tenerife or be allowed to apply to join the League, a diplomatic coup that forced the rulers of Valencis to return to the negotiating table with a much weaker hand and a ruined reputation.

"If her south didn't keep setting itself on fire, she'd have most of the north back by now," General Grem opined in a growl.

Brabant and southern Lyonis had been reclaimed, but beyond that little else. Prince Otto Redcrown had led the return of the Lycaonese exodus, helping in the reconquest of Brus as he went, but though Neustria had been reclaimed and Rhenia relieved the rest remained in the hands of the dead. A push had seized the Morgentor and closed Twilight's Pass, but otherwise the great prince of the north seemed content to slowly reclaim old Lycaonese lands by pushing a little further every summer. He had done this with little help from any southerner save the Kingfisher Prince, who himself had been forced to essentially occupy southern Lyonis so the dead would not spill back through it into Brus after royal forces withdrew.

There was talk of a marriage with Sophie Louvroy, abdicated princess of Lyonis and last survivor of the main branch of the House of Louvroy, to formalize the arrangement.

After the Procerans came and went the rulers of Levant replaced them, riding with their lords of the Blood. King Razin and Queen Aquiline advanced under the star-studded banner of the Thuraya, the name they had adopted upon being crowned by the Majilis. The

young queen's obvious pregnancy drew even more eyes than the appearance of the rather famous Lord Ishaq Rabia, first of the Barrow's Blood, whose town on the southern edge of the Brocelian was said to be growing fast.

"That succession is going to be a headache even if they have a kid," the Warden grunted. "Mark my words."

"The Circle of Thorns believe they want three children," Lady Cordelia noted. "One to inherit Levante and the crown after them, the other two for Malaga and Tartessos."

"The Majilis isn't toothless enough to allow that," Catherine Foundling replied. "They surrendered veto power, but it doesn't make them pushovers."

"Vaccei and Alava will threaten revolt, I agree," Lady Cordelia mused. "They will have to water their wine, pass the cities to kinsmen. It is doing them a favour in the long term, I would think."

"Three royal branches all with their own cities?" Lady Pickler snorted. "Because *that's* not a civil war in thirty years. I thought you said they were smart kids, Cat."

"They're still Blood," the Warden sighed, "it comes with some blinders. They've done well otherwise."

With the Levantines come and gone, the Callowan royal procession approached. Queen Vivienne of Callow led it, her recent husband prince-consort Cathal Iarsmai close behind. Though rumours had spread that marrying Grand Duchess Kegan's eldest grandson had been her price to keep Daoine in the Kingdom of Callow, the couple seemed happy enough. Cathal was only some years younger than the queen, after all, and handsome in the Deoraithe way.

"How much younger is he?" Lady Pickler asked.

"Just turned twenty," the Warden said.

"And divorced last year," Lady Cordelia said, sounding like she enjoyed the scandal. "A stroke of luck for Kegan, that, the second closest grandson is still twelve."

"If she'd been willing to settle for a nephew it could have been done years ago," the Warden noted, "but she wanted her own blood in the royal line."

House Foundling would inherit the same as any other, in the end, save that if it turned unworthy there would be a great many orphans ready to restore dignity to the crown. The decision had been contentious in the early years, but Queen Vivienne's reign had been peaceful and prosperous. Plenty had a way of silencing

doubts, and the kingdom's rising trade guilds paired with the resettling of Liesse had occupied energies that might otherwise have turned to mischief.

After Callow came the League of Free Cities, Empress Basilia her vassal rulers of Nicae and Stygia arriving first. Formal diplomats from the other cities followed, as though Anaxares the Hierarch had kept his Name he had spurned invitations to return to the League when invited during his reappearance in Orense. It had been considered a surrender of the title, even by Bellerophon, which had allowed the League cities to resume foreign affairs and vote on joining the Liesse Accords.

"They'll have another Hierarch within the decade," the Warden said. "Basilia's getting too powerful, they'll want something to balance her influence."

And should she refuse, it might well come to civil war within the League. Which she could not afford, given that she was still trying to get Tenerife accepted as a member-state.

"She will pare down the powers of the office and get Tenerife brought into the fold as a trade," Lady Cordelia predicted.

"Don't say that in front of Ikaroi," Genera Grem grunted in amusement. "He'll send it home."

The head archivist of Cardinal College, Nestor Ikaroi, was not longer formally of the Secretariat but was still rather openly and amiably spying for Delos. He was so useful none of them particularly minded. The humour that had touched them at that retreated when the following delegation arrived.

Chancellor Alaya did not come in person, which only strengthened the rumours she was not far from stepping down – and that the Warden would kill her should they meet in person – but both High Marshal Nim and one of Lord Councillors had been sent, a strong showing. Especially so considering that Lord Councillor Sargon Sahelian being increasingly charged with foreign diplomacy was speculated to be a sign that the chancellor wanted him to succeed her.

"Queen Vivienne will be miffed," Cordelia predicted. "She would prefer High Lady Abreha to be in his place."

"Of course she would," Catherine Foundling snorted, "the old fox's promised to sell Callow the Blessed Isle if she's elected chancellor."

The border between the Confederation of Praes and the Kingdom of Callow had been a matter of some debate after the end of the War on Keter. The Blessed Isle was in Praesi hands and the Fields of Streges in Callowan ones, but the land had never been formally

ceded and there had never been a declaration of war between either realms since the secession of Callow. Chancellor Alaya had traded the disarmament of the Isle to the Callowan crown in exchange for a lasting treaty that allowed the Confederation to buy a fixed quantity of grain at a fixed price every year, bolstering her position and securing food for Ater, but the borders had yet to be formally fixed.

"Sargon Sahelian's trade policies are sounder," Cordelia firmly said. "And his support for Cardinal College significantly stronger."

"You just want to edge Mercantis entirely out of the spice trade, you cutthroat bitch," the Warden fondly said. "At least own it."

"Their position as the perennial middleman is a loss to all of Calernia," Lady Cordelia righteously replied, but her lips twitched.

The northern realms came in swift succession. First the Herald of the Deeps, formally recognized as king of Kishar when he'd signed the Accords two years past, who'd come with a small retinue whose splendid armour was still eclipsed by the colourful parade of fire spirits that flocked to him like birds.

"Good call renaming Keter something that starts with a K," Lady Pickler said. "It'll make it stick sooner."

"I am sure that is the only reason the name was chosen," Lady Cordelia drawled. "Well spotted, my lady."

"I'm not taking that lip from someone who giggles at being called Cordy when she's drunk," the goblin bit back.

Following the dwarves came the representatives from burgeoning Zemebreg, the Firstborn colony that dwelled in the city once called Cleves. Mighty Rumena itself led it accompanied by a pack of the wandering riddle-priests endemic to its city that had become famous in the Principate. With them came the envoys from Serolen itself, eldest and greatest of the spreading drow cities, came greater names. Mighty Radegast led the group, now famous for the terrifying mercenary army it had led in Nesutria and Rhenia on Prince Otto's behalf. Then Ivah of the Losara, First Under the Night and Lord of Silent Steps. The priest was perhaps the best-known of the Firstborn, nowadays, for it had spent several years in the Principate after the end of the War on Keter. The bargains it had struck with the First Princess for mercenary sigils had been instrumental in clawing back control of the western coast, allowing Segovian shipping to resume to Prince Otto's realm.

"I'm glad Malanza didn't bring any of the Most Holy or we'd have a brawl on our hands," the Warden said, and it was not entirely a jest.

There were many names for the worship of Sve Noc, these days. The Tenets of Night remained most common, but the Faith of Crows and the House of Night were spreading as well. In Callow mostly through the Army, and aside from a scuffle over an order of knights that had insisted on being allowed anointment in Night to outrage from the House Constant there had been little trouble. It was seen as a soldier's cult, little more. In Procer and the Grey Eyries, however, things had taken a different turn. The Matrons had banned the worship, only for the measure to be backfire by spreading word and then be overturned by Chancellor Alaya besides, and now they were said to be wrestling with a great deal of unrest.

In Procer it had grown beyond that, however. Night was simply too tempting a power for a realm where banditry and roving bands of undead were still a real threat even all these years later. The House of Light's campaign of words to denounce the heresy had taken strong root in the south, but it had rung hollow north in the heartlands and north where drow sigils and wandering riddle-priests looking for worthy foes had saved many a life. Though yet frowned upon, the Faith of Crows was spreading and the Liesse Accords prevented the Highest Assembly from making this illegal. Hostility between the Proceran House and the Losara – considered a priest-caste in the Principate, and not without reason – in particular had risen to dangerous heights.

"Be glad we did not invite Tenerife," Lady Cordelia grimly replied. "They gave back their House the right to raise troops."

The last delegation to arrive, and not by happenstance, was that from Thalassocracy of Ashur. It was the last realm of Calernia not to have signed the Liesse Accords, and its envoys were the reason so many great names had come to the opening of Cardinal College. It would have been an important moment on its own, but the last signatory joining the Accord added great weight. Seven years after the fall of Keter, the Ashuran civil war had finally been brought to an end and the results had been expected by few. Instead of the Hadast claimant pushed by Arwad or Smyrna's insistence a Tyrian from overseas must be sent for, a fourth-tier citizen from Smyrna by the name of Baltsar Aderbal had taken control.

He'd been a middle-aged man with few allies when he'd declared the Committee of Government with the backing of only citizens of lower tiers tired of the fighting, but the reason he was now ruler of Ashur was the same two people standing behind he as he approached: the Blessed Artificer and the Archmage. Sapan the Apprentice had become Sapan the Mage and reportedly lost her temper when returning to Ashur after the war. After crushing the Blue Mage and half a school's worth of practitioners in a spectacular blowout when the other Named backed the Hadast claimant and attempted assassination of Baltsar Aderbal, she had

transitioned into the Archmage and ended the civil war through sheer fear of angering her further.

She had, after all, blown up most of a mountain.

"Baltsar isn't the real power there," Lady Pickler said. "I don't care if he's called the head of their governing committee, either of those women could take his seat in a moment."

"Not Lady Adanna," Cordelia said. "She was born there but her looks are Soninke. Smyrnan elites rose up over having to back a Hadast relative married to a Levantine, they would go quite mad over her."

"Sapan's like Masego in some ways," the Warden said. "She wants to pursue her studies more than mingle. Mind you, she's a little more involved than Zeze's ever been."

"The decision to sever ties with the Baalite Hegemony is entirely hers," Cordelia agreed. "As has been reaching out to Praes in friendship to balance a resurgent League."

"Malicia's old dream come true," Catherine Foundling smiled, just a little too tightly.

"Boring," Pickler frankly said. "Can't believe I have to be here and Hanno got out of it. He's Ashuran, he should be here more than me."

"His having a look up north is more important," the Warden said. "If the word Hakram has sent is true, we have reason to be worried."

"There are records of elves being active outside the Bloom, if ancient ones," Cordelia said. "It is this talk of ratlings wandering the steppes that worry me. They could not have reached there without the Forever King's tacit allow."

The Warlord had been called in by far clans only loosely under his banner, tales of entire clans disappearing reaching his court, and duly informed Cardinal even as he moved north to investigate. The White Knight had gone alone, as the finest sword the Warden had to wield. General Grem cleared his throat.

"The Ashurans are getting close," he said. "They'll hear."

They fell into silence, the Warden allowing her gaze to fall onto the last delegation. The last great realm of the surface that had yet to sign the Liesse Accords, come here on the day where the great school she had dreamed with Hakram would open its gates to students. The sky above them was an endless sunny blue, cut only by the great towers of Cardinal College, and she let the warmth of the sun seep into her bones.

It was a good day, she thought, and there were better ones yet ahead.

—

The lecture hall was a large spread of stone with comfortable seats behind writing desks, built to easily fit a hundred, and it had been filled to the brim. Cardinal College allowed students to enroll in elective classes from their second year onwards, after the basics had been taught, and now that the first batch had reached the milestone near every mage in attendance had hurried to sign up for General Theory of Magic. Some had learned Lower Miezan specifically to be able to attend this particular set of lectures out of the three of, for they would be given by the most famous mage of the age. Without warning the door burst open and the Lord Hierophant strode into the hall and it went quiet as a grave, save for the tinkle of the trinkets woven into his hair. He looked, many noted, in a foul mood.

A flick of the wrist had chalk rising and writing General Theory of Magic on the large grey slate, the odd-eyed man turning to face the silent class.

"Before the month is over," he said, "half of you will be gone."

Several students swallowed.

"No dead," the Hierophant clarified. "The College has rules about that."

The words were not as reassuring as he had clearly meant them to be.

"You will be expected to take notes and study on your own," he continued, "and I will not slow the pace for the slower students. Should you struggle, you are free to attend the Senior Lecturer Beaumont's lectures instead – they are also given in Lower Miezan."

A pause, waiting for volunteers. There were none.

"Then we proceed," the Hierophant said. "Before we begin, I have been informed I am to give you the opportunity to ask questions. Raise your hand if you wish to do so, you will be called on."

A dark-skinned young woman in elaborate red and black robes was the first to raise her hand and so the first to earn the right to speak.

"You," Hierophant said.

"My lord," she said, "may I ask why you are giving what could be considered an introductory lecture instead of something more befitting your talents?"

The Hierophant's flesh eye narrowed.

"Sahelian, are you?" he asked.

She proudly nodded.

"I am-"

"Not interested," the Hierophant noted. "I knew Akua Sahelian, still consider her a friend. Lesser variants are of little interest. As for your question, it's because the contents of my Deicide and Applied Blasphemy lecture are currently locked into a vault after eating the soul of the warlock that tried to steal them."

A great many students breathed in sharply. Some second thoughts were had.

"And Hasenbach insists I have to teach something if I want my funding for the experiment," he continued. "Which is ridiculous, given the obvious benefits."

Though it had taken barely two years for Masego to accept Cordelia's invitation to refer to her by her first name, monthly funding debates saw her inevitably relegated to being 'Hasenbach' for a few days. A boy in the front, blond-haired and blue-eyed with stocky Callowan look, was the next called on.

"What's your experiment?" he eagerly asked.

"The technicalities are beyond any of you," Hierophant said, "but on the submission scroll I summed it up as 'forcing apotheosis onto a pig'."

Half the students paled. About a dozen leaned forward eagerly. Another boy, Ashuran by the looks of him, was next.

"Is it true you taught the Archmage?" he excitedly asked.

"Sapan learned from me," the Hierophant noted, "but I cannot claim to have taught her."

A pause.

"If you believe attending my lectures will turn you into her, abandon the idea," he cautioned. "She is a once in a generation talent and I have no reason to believe any of you are."

Several winces but few arguments. Even in the College, where already two Named were in attendance, few had the arrogance to compare themselves to the Archmage of Ashur. Next was a dark-haired girl, Arlesite in looks, and her accent was thick when she spoke up.



"Why should we attend your lectures instead of the others?" she asked. "What do they bring us?"

The Hierophant beamed.

"The first good question today," he praised.

The girl looked surprised, perhaps having expected irritation out of the infamously impatient mage. He glanced at her a second time, finding that she was young to be here. Eight, nine years old at most? And vaguely reminiscent of someone he likely should have paid more attention to at some point, an unfortunately broad list.

"The other Senior Lecturers," he told the class, "will teach you general theory with an accent on the manner of magic they practice themselves. I will not."

Under the eye cloth, an orb of glass shone with the light of miracles crafted and stolen both.

"I will be teaching you of the rules," the Hierophant smiled, "only to best explain how to *break them*."

Half the class was gone by the moon's turn, as he had predicted. The rest signed up to every single lecture the Lord Hierophant gave at Cardinal College.

—

Ater had recovered from the Battle of the Spiders.

It had been years since then, almost nine, and in the wake of the War on Keter the newly founded Confederation of Praes had thrived. With a willing if wary Callow as a trading partner, Chancellor Alaya had gathered a like-minded few to her council and undertaken reforms. Taxation of territories was reorganized to be handled directly by Ater, cutting out the middleman collector of the the High Seats. It tripled the revenue of the chancellorship over the span of a year while she appeased the same great with exemptions tailored to ensure they would remain the wealthiest of the aristocracy. With the ardent support of the High Lady of Kahtan, a young woman of strong reformist bent whose life had once been saved by the White Knight in Keter, the Taghreb aristocracy Hungering Sands made bereft of an overlord by the end of Thalassina and goblin rule in Foramen were reorganized into districts patterned on the past imperial governorships of Callow.

High Lady Rana Muraqib's rumoured marriage proposal to the White Knight in the wake of this was the subject of excited gossip for years.

Meticulously negotiated treaties with the Warlord solidified the vassal state status of the Clans and the rights of all greenskins in Praes, including confirming the cession of the fortress of Chagoro and attendant territories. Hakram Deadhand set his court there and began raising his capital, deepening trade ties as orc mercenary companies – verdant companies, they were called in Procer – were sent west to fight under Procer to bleed out the old urge to raid. Besides, the northern clans were occupied with the growing rattling infestation in the Lesser Steppes. There was plenty of war and meat to go around these days.

But only outside, for within there was order. Permanent Legions of Terror fortresses in all regions to ensure order did not collapse in the wake of the disbanding of the old armies. Negotiations with the rebels of the Green Stretch ended in the region being assigned a governor by Ater but receiving an electoral vote in return.

Only in the Grey Eyries did peace wane, as the Tribes had eaten themselves alive over the matter of Night. After a panicked ban of worship that ended in disaster the Matrons attempted to pivot into priesthood but found Sve Noc lukewarm to the approaches. Several tribes collapsed into infighting, males or lesser females using Night to overthrow their superiors, but wiser Matrons instead raised the status of those who could use Night as being above those others. Even the males. It avoided widespread civil war, but with every season as more left for the greener pastures of Foramen, Callow and Procer their authority ebbed. Perhaps in time it would shatter entirely.

And as the years had passed, as peace kept and Praes entered an age of prosperity, Catherine Foundling counted the days. Until one night, just before dawn, the Warden slipped into a palace at the heart of Ater. It was not Tower, not mountain of horror and hubris, but it was opulent nonetheless. Nestled at the heart was a great garden with the stars for a roof, kept pristine by gardeners and enchantments both. At this hour of the night, with dawn approaching, there was no one there.

No one save for Alaya of Satus and the Warden who'd come for her.

The chancellor sat alone in a copper garden chair, leaning back into silk cushions and looking at the starlit sky as she sipped a cup of wine. The bottle was on the table, empty. It was of rough make, cheap glass for a cheap wine that some might have said tasted of mud. The dark-skinned beauty was pleasantly drunk, by the look of her, but even so her face betrayed no surprise when the Warden slid out of shadow as if she had come into being from nothing at all. Alaya only smiled and invited Catherine Foundling to sit.

"Warden," she said.

"Chancellor," the other replied.

"Congratulations are in order, I believe," Alaya said. "The ealamal was successfully put to use."

"Adanna does good work," the Warden agreed. "The poison clouds are already dispersing and it will reverse the blight on the Kingdom of the Dead fully over the next thirteen months. Or so the latest word out of Kishar goes."

"The Herald will be pleased," the chancellor mused. "He has been chafing to expand on the surface as he has been doing below."

The collapse of the Kingdom Under into half a hundred squabbling fiefdoms had only continued, allowing the Herald of the Deeps to seize the lands beneath most of what had once been the Kingdom of the Dead. There were few cities and farms there, however, mostly fortresses and forges. Farmland would be a blessing for an expanding realm swelling with refugees from the brutal strife of the dwarven heartlands.

"The Archmage's theorem was impressive work," Catherine Foundling said. "Even Masego was impressed."

"A rising name as well as a rising Name," Alaya commented. "Her proposal of lending Baalite mages to help ours create irrigation canals in the Hungering Sands is the talk of Praes. I believe my successor will take her up on it."

"And you know who that'll be?" the Warden idly asked.

The chancellor smiled.

"Sargon Sahelian, unless I am much mistaken," she said. "I have allowed him to expand his influence unchecked, far beyond the gains I conceded to Abreha."

"Hakram tells me he's popular with the Clans," the other woman agreed. "The help he offered in Chagoro – Hagaz now, sorry – went over well with the chiefs."

"He can be quite charming," Alaya said, "and his utter disinterest in territorial expansion is exactly what we need. He would much rather spend the treasury on rebuilding Praes than consider adventures abroad."

The Warden slowly nodded.

"You will leave him a Confederation on the rise," she acknowledged. "Ater has been rebuilt, trade with Callow is the highest it has ever been and all of Praes is on the path to recovery from the Uncivil Wars."

She paused.

"I walked the city, before coming here," the Warden said. "They love you again, the people in the streets."

"Mobs have short memories," the chancellor sighed.

"Maybe," Catherine Foundling said. "But they're not wrong either. I gave you eight years, and you have used them to rule ably and justly."

The dark-skinned beauty smiled.

"Sentiment, Catherine?" she drawled. "So late in the game?"

"I've been known to indulge," the Warden shrugged.

She was no longer a young woman, to be offended by something she had long made peace with.

"Is that why you have been sending casual letters to Marshal Juniper and her wife?" Alaya smiled.

"Aisha's the Governess-General, that's as high a position as Marshal," the other chided. "And I'm being practical with that too. Grem has been talking about retiring down the line, living out his last years in the Steppes, and I'll need someone to command Cardinal's forces then."

Queen Vivienne would stringently object at losing Aisha and Juniper would not relish leaving the Army of Callow behind, but the Warden suspected the two of them would be swayed by the prospect of living in the same city enough to accept after Grem retired.

"A large army, for a young city-state," the chancellor said. "However important it has grown to be."

"If we were just handling the defence of our territory, suppressing banditry and the like, it'd be too large," the Warden freely conceded. "But the Black Legion is meant to be used against Named running wild and other threats to the Accords."

A moment of silence between them.

"He would have enjoyed the name, I think," Alaya quietly said. "He was always a little vainer than he allowed himself to believe he was."

"I figured," Catherine Foundling quietly replied. "Besides, it's his tactics we're teaching them."

Their gazes moved away, drawn by the night sky that did not yet betray the coming of dawn.

"How was it?"

"Eight years of choking down ash and dust," Alaya honestly said. "But it is done, Catherine. I laid both our sins to rest. I made Praes into what we wanted it to be."

The other woman considered that, for a moment.

"I'm glad," she said, and found she meant it.

Neither of them broke the silence for a long time. And as dawn approached, Catherine Foundling rose to her feet.

"It won't be painful," the Warden said.

That had never been the point. The chancellor of Praes drained the last of her cup, setting it down, and smiled the smile of a woman who had spent most of her life one step ahead of everyone else in the room.

"It wasn't," Alaya of Satus softly agreed, "when I drank the poison an hour ago."

She would die as she had lived, holding her fate in her own hands. Her body was cold when dawn found it, sitting alone in her beautiful garden and staring at the sky through dead eyes.

So passed Alaya of Satus, once known as Dread Empress Malicia and last of that dreadful line.

—

It had been ten years from the fall of Keter and a debt was owed.

Hye Su waited in the clearing where Refuge had once stood, greenery having since clawed back the grounds. She was sitting on a stone, honing the edge of her blades with a whetting stone. When the Warden arrived, near the coming of dusk, she displayed no surprise.

"So you came alone," Hye Su said, tone giving faint praise. "I wondered if you'd try to drag one of your little leagues into it."

It had not been so long since the Guild and the Society were founded, but Hye Su had kept her ear to the ground. The founding of both had led to a great deal of talk, for it was not everyday that companies of Named. The differences were not so great, even though the Guild stood for Below and the Society for Above. Behind all the details, the essence was the same: they were both ways for Named to make enforced bargains with one another and other entities. Be they with kingdoms or vagrants, the deals brokered by Guild and Society were made with the strength of Cardinal behind them. All at the simple price of those who joined the ranks agreeing to simple rules of conduct.

Named flocked to Cardinal for a reason.

"It's not what they're for," the Warden shrugged.

The other woman laughed.

"I suppose not," she conceded. "They're to corral the herd you let loose."

The Warden cocked her head to the side.

"So you noticed it," she said. "I wondered how obvious it was to those without our resources."

"Names are popping up like weeds," Hye Su said. "You don't need spies to see it. It used to be that there was one every few years, Foundling, but now?"

She snorted.

"I hear there's three Apprentices running around and your Knight Errant has already picked up a Squire," she said. "It's only been ten years since Keter and you've already made back every Name you lost and change."

"Too many people know stories, know about how Names work," the Warden said. "There'd never been so many Named in the same place as there were in the Arsenal or Keter, or a place like Cardinal. We made it easier for them to come into being."

"Made them weaker, too," Hye Su scathingly said. "Power spread around is thinned."

"It makes for a better world, I think," the Warden said.

"You would say that," Hye Su replied, "having made it."

She rose to her feet, blades in hand, and though she was one of the most dangerous women alive Catherine Foundling was not worried. She had learned tricks from friends and foes over the last decade, but her certainty did not come from them. She had made the world of today, her enemy had said, and there was truth to that. And it was just as true that Hye Su had been left behind by that world. It has passed her by.

And so this could only end one way.

—

There were only four students in the circular hall, which was deep below the College and so heavily warded the magic could be tasted in the air. Torchlight did not light up every shadowed stretch, but the sculpted ritual circle in the middle glowed faintly red and tinged even the dark. Many would have balked at

such a sight, but these nine wore the silver stripe on their robes that denoted students in their last year who had distinguished themselves enough to be allowed into restricted classes.

"Welcome," the Lord Hierophant said, "to Nature of Divinity and Practical Applications."

There was a snort from a dark-skinned girl. Taiwo Sahelian cocked an eyebrow.

"Sir, you do know every still calls it Deicide and Applied Blasphemy right?" she said.

"As they should," Hierophant muttered, "it is a *much* better name."

"Seneschal Hasenbach is threatening to cut the lunacy fund again, isn't she?" fair-haired Anthony Fletcher grinned.

"It's Catherine this time," Hierophant sighed. "She says that feeding the Swine King to the fae wasn't enough to get the House of Light to drop the matter so we need to 'tread carefully for a bit'."

"It wasn't even a real god," Isabel Malanza complained. "We only got halfway there."

Occasionally First Princess Rozala's eldest daughter showed her age, the lowest of them all at twelve. None of them had dared to underestimate her since the time she'd made the Apprentice float atop Concord Bridge for half a day after the Taghreb condescended to her about Olowe's Theorem. Rumour had it the Warden had ordered to leave him up there as an object lesson.

"It was the village that did it, I think," Hiram of Arwad mildly said. "Upright pigs tilling the land and building houses was a mite disturbing, I'll admit."

Hiram was not the most talented of them, and by far, but solid common sense and a facility with language meant he had already been approached to serve as a Junior Lecturer after graduation.

"No matter," Hierophant dismissed. "Now, all of you should have read on Dumisai's Theorem over the last week."

A chorus of agreements.

"Good," Masego grinned. "Now the interesting part. If fae are fundamentally the stuff of Arcadia given form, then what happens if that stuff is used to try to make a devil?"

The circle glowed ominously as the four students leaned in eagerly.

—

It was fifteen years after the fall of Keter that the first true challenge to the Liesse Accords came.

"You know," the Warden said, "I really did think it would be the ratlings that made the other shoe drop."

"It's only a matter of time until the elves find a Horned Lord," the White Knight said. "But you know my thoughts on that already."

"And you mine," the Warden replied. "The Golden Bloom's not an Accords signatory and no one wants to try invading that wasp's nest when the elves aren't directly acting."

It had not been proved that the Forever King was using the shards of the Twilight Ways to ferry the Chain of Hunger east, though the leading mages of Calernia all agreed it was the most likely explanation. There were already suspicions that the same was being done to the Brocelian and the Waning Woods, the elves seeking to break apart human realms as a prelude for resuming expansion. The success of the Spring Crown ritual had ignited in them a thirst for intervention beyond their borders that had not been heard of in millennia.

"Passivity now will cost us in years to come," Hanno said.

"I don't disagree," Catherine grunted. "I just don't see a solution. Besides, let's start by putting out the fire in front of us."

Atalante was on fire. The Preacher's seizure of power through a coup had not been a breach of the Accords, no matter how heated the man's rhetoric, but after transitioning into the Philosopher King he'd ceased all pretence that he intended to respect the rules. Prescription of the worship of Night and execution of all suspected sympathizers of Below had been only the beginning of the bloodshed, but it was the King's use of angelic influence to raise an army of fanatics out of towns and villages that'd guaranteed there would be war.

The armies under Empress Basilia were facing the Host of Light and its fearsome general further south, but riots in Atalante had proved an opening for the Black Legion to risk a decapitating strike on the tyrant himself. The Archmage had blown open the gates and now black-armoured soldiers were putting down the Philosopher King's fanatic soldiers, and now the man himself was holed up in the Temple of Manifold Truths.

And he was, by the looks of the distant glow lighting up the night sky, calling on a Choir once more.



"Let us end it before more died needlessly," the White Knight agreed.

The two of them tore through the Philosopher King's personal guard like a storm. Numbers meant little to the likes of them, at the summit of their power, and it was not long before they entered the chamber where the Philosopher King himself awaited. The ragged, wild-eyed man sat in his pale robes and clutched the many prayer beads on his wrists and neck as he hollered his prayers.

"You're too late," the Philosopher King laughed, "Contrition comes and-"

"**Silence**," the Warden said.

Catherine Foundling, it was said, had defied angels many a time. And won more often than not. The story held true that night, Contrition's light winking out.

"Cassander of Atalante," the White Knight said. "For breach of the Liesse Accords on counts of unfair proscription, malicious use of non-creational influence and mass murder by means of Name you are to receive judgement by the Warden."

"Never," the Philosopher King hissed. "Don't you see, Knight, how Below is winning? Spreading everywhere, villains growing like weeds to strangle all the world? They must be stopped now, purged while we still can and-"

"Cassander of Atalante," the Warden said, "I **Sentence** you to die."

And though angels screamed, though Light flared like a sun and the Philosopher King unleashed the last of his power, the White Knight's sword found his neck. As if it had been fated to be cut. The two of them stood over the cooling corpse, tired.

"He's only the first," the White Knight said. "There will be others."

"Below will unleash the next," the Warden softly agreed. "It'll get uglier, before it gets better."

"Isn't that always the way?" the other man smiled.

It was rare for them to take the field together, these days, but whenever they did the easy complicity of their youth always returned.

"I'll leave the corpse to you," the White Knight said. "General Grem might yet need aid securing the city."

She nodded. He had taken a wound today, an arrow to the belly, and though his life was in no danger she suspected it would only hurry the old orc's retirement. Aisha had been making noise in their letters about wanting more time to spend on finishing her memoirs. A hint that, now that Juniper was satisfied with General Abigail as successor, she might consider leaving the Army of Callow behind. Said Lady Abigail Tanner had retired thrice already, but the flooding of her first mansion and then going bankrupt twice had returned her to service every time. It was a fond tale in Callow that she could not be out of the army for longer than three months without calamity striking.

The Gods themselves wanted Abigail Tanner to be Marshal of Callow one day.

The Warden felt the presence before she heard it. The way Creation shivered as someone who had not been came to be. And when she turned, her breath caught in her throat as she beheld Akua Sahelian. Lovely beyond words in a splendid red dress, golden eyes smiling as she touched the copper bracelet at her wrist. The cuffs of her dress were ornate lace, hearts woven into the pattern. Her two marks were these: red and a heart. No matter what she wore Calamity had a splash of red on it, and always a heart was hidden somewhere in it. Time had little changed her, the Warden saw.

Such a thing as time held much of a grip on either of them, she supposed. The gift of the Sister for one and eternity bound for the other kept age at bay.

"Catherine," Akua smiled.

"Akua," Catherine softly replied.

The wounds suffered in Keter were gone. As were Providence's, rumour had it, whose flask and lute had returned along with her arm. The faces of Yara of Nowhere and Akua Sahelian also remained, neither changing through the years.

"I though you might show up," the Warden said. "Your stars are out tonight."

Two bright shards of light in the sea of darkness. Fortune and Misfortune, some had taken to calling them. Providence and Calamity, others used instead.

"We bargained," Akua said. "She will get her way in Levant for the night, but I have the freedom of my own."

"And what," Catherine Foundling croaked, "would you do with it?"

Akua Sahelian took a hesitant step forward. It had been fifteen years since they saw each other last. It might be that long, or

even longer before they saw each other again. Yet she still reached out to the other woman, fingers brushing against hers, a question asked. Neither of them were sure which reached out, not until they were kissing ardently and stumbling away from the throne and the corpse that lay on it.

They had only until dawn, so they must make the most of the time

—

Cordelia Hasenbach was drinking.

This was not as rare an occasion as when she had ruled Procer, but that it would venture past the first bottle of wine was. She was in a maudlin mood, however, and took no pains to hide it. Catherine found her in one of the private salons atop what Cardinalians had taken to calling the Warden's Tower, the northern of the two great towers that made up Cardinal College and the ruling seat of the city.

"I see you've heard," the Warden said.

"I have," Cordelia said, and poured her companion a drink without asking.

Catherine cocked a brow but sat, taking the implicit invitation and the cup with it.

"A lot of it stays," the Warden says. "Most of the trade clauses and part of the alliance."

"The Grand Alliance had ended," Cordelia calmly said. "You need not coddle me over it."

Procer and Callow still held a defensive alliance, but Levant had ended their own given the rising tensions at the border with the vassal Republic of Orense. Keeping the treaties alive had been increasingly unpopular, given that few still saw a need for it. Some argued such stringent alliances were more likely to create war than prevent it, these days.

"It was made to foster peace," Catherine said. "And it worked, Cordelia."

There had not been major strife since the Philosopher's War, and though skirmishes at borders were hardly uncommon the balance of Calernia was holding.

"I achieved what I set out to," Cordelia Hasenbach agreed. "But the great work of my life has still ended. I am, I think, allowed sentiment over that. And a drink."

The Warden drank of her cup.

"I can't argue with that," she said.

The other woman sent her sly look.

"I would expect not," she said, "given what happened last time I opened a second bottle."

News of Prince Otto's wedding to a Neustrian noblewoman a few years back had sent her into a fit of nostalgia. Not regret, but perhaps wonder at the life she might have lived. After all Otto Reitzenberg, born the third son of a friendly royal line, had once been considered as a potential consort for Prince Cordelia of Rhenia. Catherine Foundling coughed, cheeks flushing in a way that still amused the other woman even after nearly two decades of acquaintance.

"I thought we didn't talk about that," Catherine said, tone careful.

"It seemed an unnecessary complication at the time," Cordelia said. "Besides, you are something of a cad."

"Hey now," Catherine weakly protested.

The once-princess idly traced the rim of her cup with a finger.

"Not only do you have a lover in Indrani whenever she visits," Cordelia said, "but you have taken others to bed."

"When the mood took me," she replied. "And not that many."

Which was true. The Ranger, who returned to Cardinal every year between the adventures across Calernia that made her the stuff of legends all over the continent, made up most of the dalliances. Cordelia had never felt jealous, not when Indrani was still so very obviously in love with Masego. Who reciprocated, she had seen, in his own way. Besides, the Ranger only blew in for a fortnight or so and the blew back out with a handful of Named students in two for one of her infamous 'field classes'. As a way to earn silver stripes of distinction, they had proved most useful.

"That is not untrue," Cordelia conceded.

"Then what?" Catherine frowned.

The former princess decided on honesty.

"I did not want to become involved with someone who was still in love with another," Cordelia admitted. "Akua Sahelian's shadow is yet cast on all your affections, I think."

The Warden drank deep of her cup, then set it down.

"I think I'll always be a little in love with her," Catherine Foundling admitted. "And I'm not sure I want to surrender that part of me. It shaped who I've become."

Cordelia waited. The *but*, though unspoken, had resonated loudly.

"It's not something that eats me day to day, though," Catherine said. "I don't go to sleep thinking of what might have been. It's just something about me, like the colour of my hair or the lines on my face."

Not that she had anywhere as many of those as Cordelia. The Warden still looked in her late twenties, and likely would for centuries yet.

"Sometimes you do have a touch of romance about you," Cordelia mused, "though it seems largely accidental."

"I am who I am," Catherine Foundling half-smiled. "I don't pretend otherwise."

And that was, Cordelia admitted to herself, true. In these affairs, the other woman was an open book. And though it still felt like there was too much of an encroachment, too much of Catherine already shared, looking upon that open book she found that she liked what she saw.

"Mhm," Cordelia said. "You truly do have luck with wine, my dear."

Catherine's eye sharpened.

"Do I?" she said, leaning back into her seat. "I wonder what that might mean."

The fair-haired woman drained her cup, then rose to her feet.

"It means," Cordelia Hasenbach gracefully smiled, "that we will get to find out how long you might keep my interest, Catherine."

She got no argument. She had not expected one.

—

Common Thaumaturgic Theory had existed in research scrolls and private correspondences for the better part of a decade now, but its formal unveiling was still something of a ceremony.

Though the Lord Hierophant's involvement made it a subject of interest to even rulers, it was ultimately a matter of scholarship and so none attended in person save for Chancellor Sargon – whose unflagging support for Cardinal College and the magical wing of it in particular was well-known. Even the growing

commercial rivalry between the city and the Confederation over the artefact trade had done nothing to cool the relations.

Diplomats only politely listened to the impatient explanation given by the infamous Senior Lecturer, some of them disappointed by the plain speech given. Last year's juicy scandal of the man being revealed as the deity of an Ashuran love cult he had been a member of for many years had raised hopes for some scurrilousness. The scholars that accompanied the diplomats, however, were riveted. In the wake of the speech ending, Lecturer Hiram stepped forward to handle the divide between the learned and the uninitiated.

"Though it may seem abstract that the existence of a universally common most basic denominator has been proven, there are practical applications," he explained. "It might be best to think of it as the basic building block of all magic having been discovered."

He paused for effect.

"To accomplish this, it was necessary to be able to measure such a thing," Lecturer Hiram continued. "We have created artefacts capable of this, and in doing so created the necessity for a new unit of measurement that shall be named the 'thaum'."

The cleverest of the diplomats grasped the implications, but the young man spelled out the implications for the rest.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lecturer Hiram said, "we have made magic quantifiable for all existing branches of sorcery. Enchantment and artefact crafting will now be no more difficult than smithing or weaving. A new age of sorcery has come upon us."

Cordelia Hasenbach, standing in the back, smiled as she considered how foreign sales of the measuring artefacts – certain to continue until national mages figured out how to reproduce them – would be yet another source of coin for Cardinal's treasury. Common Thaumaturgic Theory would remain the formal name, in the years to come, but as these things always went a shorter name stuck.

The Masegan theory of magic.

—

Twenty-four years after the fall of Keter, Lady Intendant Pickler died.

The Intendant of Works did not die young, as far as goblins counted things, but neither did she die as old as some of Matron lines did. Years of hard living and a collection of wounds had taken their toll, hastening her passing. Her funeral was well-

attended by some of the great names of the continent, though not as part of any diplomatic effort. She has simply been loved by many of them. That evening twin stars shone in the sky, and the Warden stayed alone on Concord Bridge to overlook the great city sprawled below.

Providence and Calamity came calling, as she had thought they might.

"I thought you two only came at turning points," the Warden idly said, leaning against the balustrade.

Enchantments prevented the wind from crossing the threshold, leaving only a beautiful view.

"We do," Yara of Nowhere shrugged. "But then you're thinking of retiring, aren't you?"

The Warden did not deny it. The lack of a clear successor was a mark against the idea, but Cardinal and the Accords could be run without a Warden. It was the reason its ruling council existed, as there was no guarantee the Name would always be held.

"It's too early," Akua Sahelian said. "None of those might succeed you are ready."

"I'm not sure that's an argument against it," the Warden admitted.

"The Accords have to be able to hold without her holding their hands," Providence agreed. "Otherwise they're not really rules – just her authority made manifest."

"The Accords are not yet worn deep enough," Calamity disagreed. "A generation was raised knowing them but they are still fresh to Calernia's memory. She must stay until they are a bedrock."

The Warden almost laughed.

"The angel and the devil on my shoulder," she said. "Only you're neither and a little bit of both."

And she made her choice, looking down at the city she had seen grow from nothing. A little further yet, she thought. It was still too early to rest. When she turned they were both still there and her eyes found the woman she had once known as the Intercessor.

"You seem better," the Warden said.

"It has proved more interesting than I'd thought," Yara of Nowhere admitted. "Having someone else changes things."

"But you don't think it'll last," Catherine Foundling said.

"It will," Providence said. "For decades or centuries or a millennium. But it won't last, Catherine. Nothing is forever."

"Then take heart, Yara," the Warden said. "You are not nothing."

Providence's answering smile was mocking, a hatchet that would never be more than half buried. But when she vanished, Akua remained behind. That could not have been done without agreement, for that was the nature of the Fetters.

"Seven years," Akua Sahelian said.

"Felt like more than that," Catherine admitted.

"I understand," the golden-eyed woman said, "that you have taken a lover."

"Listening to rumours?" the Warden half-smiled.

She did not deny it. Neither did Akua.

"I still have evenings with Indrani sometimes, when she visits," Catherine said. "Not as often but still. We have an understanding over that."

Lycaonese mores were not flexible, but Cordelia had spent many a year among Alamans and in private their ways allowed much. Her lover had permission of her own, though she rarely used it. The lack of jealousy had been refreshing.

"And if I were to tell you I have bargained for a night?" Akua slowly said.

"I would tell you I bargained for one as well," Catherine smiled.

The tension in the air thickened even though neither of them had moved.

"It might be the last time we see each other," Akua said. "The opportunities are... rare."

"I figured," Catherine softly replied. "So let me say goodbye properly."

It was a long night but still felt all too short.

—

Thirty years after the fall of Keter, Hakram Deadhand came to Cardinal.

It was no longer the half-finished creature of its infancy, now turned into a rising city-state whose place at the crossroads of Calernia drew throngs of hopeful to. Already near twenty thousand



dwelled there, and the number would only grow. He had changed no less than the city, for it was Hakram who had come to Cardinal and not the Warlord. He was no longer that, having passed down the mantle to his successor Anker Bluemane. Troke's daughter would do well as Warlord, having turned her clan's reputation around and tightened the alliance with the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves.

For all that he was thousands of miles away from the Steppes, in some ways going to Cardinal felt like coming home. It was, he thought, the people that waited for him there. Aisha and Juniper, settled there a decade ago with their pair of adopted boys – one Taghreb, the other an orc. Masego, the perennial Senior Lecturer whose longstanding relationship with the famous wandering Ranger was scandalously scandalous. And Catherine Foundling most of all, who welcomed him with a warm embrace.

"Finally decided to retire, have you?" she teased.

"I could use something to keep my hands busy," Hakram admitted.

"I'm sure Cordelia will find something," the Warden amusedly replied. "She has a way with that."

"I'm sure," he gravelled, cocking an eyebrow suggestively.

Speculation of the true nature of the relationship between the Warden and her seneschal had been ongoing for many a year now, varying from simply very affectionate to them being secretly wed. Lady Cordelia seemed, if anything, to enjoying encouraging wildly different rumours.

"I don't want to hear that from you," she snorted. "How many kids have you got now?"

"Seventeen," Hakram shrugged.

He had raised few of them himself, as many had been born to strengthen alliances and not out of any particular affection. His three by the only lover he had never ended his time with were the only ones he was truly close to.

"My youngest by Sigvin's a student at the College," he said. "I've been meaning to look in on him."

"You'll have the time, I imagine," his friend smiled.

"Nothing but, Catherine," Hakram Deadhand smiled back.

—

Forty-three years after the fall of Keter, Hanno of Arwad died.

The Eater had risen, the ancient Horned Lord leading the Chain of Hunger through shard of Twilight to ravage the Free Cities even as Anaxares the Hierarch appeared in Nok and stirred rebellion against its hard-handed High Lord. The horde of ratlings overran the great walls of Delos, but for the second time in his life the White Knight came to the city's defence. He died slaying the Horned Lord, saving the better part of a hundred thousand people from certain death.

Hanno of Arwad died smiling, regretting little of the life he had lived.

His passing was mourned by as many souls as there were grains of sand.

—

Forty-eight years after the fall of Keter, Queen Vivienne Foundling's funeral was held.

It was, all agreed, the end of an era. The greats of Calernia gathered in Laure to pay their respect, even old Chancellor Sargon who was finishing up his second mandate. Vivienne the Wise had been the last survivor of the Woe, most agreed, though some insisted that since no new Ranger had risen Lady Indrani was still out there somewhere. Whatever the truth of that, the passing of the queen felt to many like the end of the revered generation that had won the War on Keter. The crown prince of Callow, Edmund Foundling, had insisted on his mother receiving full honours before his own coronation and so remained a prince as he welcomed the dignitaries.

It did nothing to weaken his authority, to the displeasure of the northern barons. Marshal Abigail, returned from her ninth retirement after her vineyard was burned down by an unseasonable lightning storm, stood firmly behind him and the Army of Callow behind her. Neither could there be question of disloyalty from the two great Callowan orders, not when the prince had served for years in the Broken Bells under old Grandmaster Talbot. And should that not have been enough, or even the enduring popularity of House Foundling across the kingdom, then the Knight Errant's presence as his former page's side would have even the most ambitious too wary to try anything.

Arthur Foundling, perhaps the most famous knight since Hanno of Arwad, rarely returned home but word of his deeds regularly trickled back. The Order Errant's acceptance of orcs into its ranks in the wake of the campaigns against the Half-Horn Lord in the marches had enraged some, but who could argue with the triumphs of the knights that had slain the three Necromancer Princes of Hainaut and crushed the riders of the Brocelian's infamous Fae Chevalier?

The procession carrying the queen's bier passed through the streets on the way to the palace, the people of Laure coming in droves to bid their farewell to the only ruler most of them could remember. Only Foundlings, royals and orphans both, held up the bier save for a single exception. The Warden herself, Sapan the Archmage. The queen was said to have been fond of Catherine Foundling's successor, in their few shared years as rulers. Prince Edmund's eulogy was heard by half the city, royal mages trained in Cardinal spreading his voice through clever spellwork.

"My mother," Edmund Foundling said, "will cast a long shadow."

He sadly laughed.

"The Woe all did, in their own way, but it is my mother's all of Callow will live in for centuries to come."

He was a skilled speaker, Edmund, but it was the sincerity of it that reached the people.

"There are few left who remember the days before the Black Queen, when we lived under Praes – now our closest ally, for all our squabbles over trade."

Laughter, some jostling, and none denying something that would have sounded sheer madness half a century ago.

"More remember the days after it, when a kingdom had to be rustled up out of thin air as enemies beset us all on our sides."

Old soldier gave grim nods, the elders of wars now passed into legend. How quickly the world moved on.

"Yet it is the days that came after the wars that made us who we are today. The peace, the struggle to stand in the world as more than an army and a cause. To rebuild villages burned, to uphold fair laws and punish the unjust. To bring prosperity to all, not only nobles."

The prince's voice grew quiet.

"It was those days of peace that decided our place in Calernia, and my mother was queen's own peace."

He shook himself, as if gathering strength.

"Today we come to bury Vivienne Foundling, but she goes to rest knowing our place was found. That we stand as proudly in peace as we did in war, that Callow is a land who need envy none other."

Edmund Foundling swallowed.

"There is much I could say of the woman who raised me, but that is a son's grief and it is a prince that speaks to you today. So

instead I will bury a great queen, and hope that wherever she is she can hear me when I say this-"

The prince smiled.

"It is our turn carry your torch," he said. "And I promise you it will burn even brighter when we pass it to our children.

Laure filled with the sound of cheers and weeping, as Callow marked the death of a queen and the rise of a king. And as the noise crested, in a dingy old tavern Dockside a barkeep who'd closed her tavern for the afternoon let out a low whistle.

"He's a pretty good speaker, your boy," Catherine Foundling admired.

"Audrey's better, but she gets too clever sometimes," Vivienne Foundling replied. "I'm glad he was born first."

Her back ached. Even with Hierophant arranging a corpse that would pass for hers she'd had to sneak out of the palace, and these days she was an old woman. More so than Catherine bloody Foundling, who barely looked forty even that because she'd spread her gift around.

"Fill my tankard, wench," the former Queen of Callow ordered. "The beer is terrible, but what else should I expect from a dive like this?"

"Eh, get it yourself," the other former Queen of Callow replied. "And this is a respectable establishment, I'll have you know. The drinks are imported."

"From where, a mud pit?" Vivienne skeptically replied.

"Well, the Green Stretch so you're not actually that far off," Catherine admitted.

She was saved from a further verbal flaying by the arrival of the others. Indrani had barely changed over the years, only her face and figure maturing, and Masego had not changed at all since Keter. The one that stood out, though, was Hakram. Who had begun to age after putting down the Name of Warlord, enough that he had been as old as her until he 'died', but now looked much as he had in his prime.

"Are we drinking?" Indrani grinned.

"We are Dockside," Masego flatly said. "I refuse to sit down."

"The beer is bad enough I'm surprised she was able to sell this place," Hakram gravelled.

And the familiarity of it had her tearing up, silly old woman that she'd become. Catherine her took her hand gently.

"It'll be all right, Viv," she said. "If you're not ready to go..."

"I am," Vivienne said. "It's not that. My children are grown and my husband dead. Edmund doesn't need me looking over his shoulder as he grows into a king. It just..."

"Feels like coming home," Hakram softly said.

Even after all these years, the depth of their understanding still surprised her.

"That's because you are," Catherine Foundling smiled, and Night roiled.

A gift had been given Catherine once by goddesses that had, in their own way, grown to love her. A Mighty's lifespan, centuries ahead of her and more. And after many years of studying the Night, she had learned to share that gift. Night flowed into Vivienne's veins, cool but pleasant, and she felt herself change. Years return to her, time's ravages turning back until she was in her prime again. As Hakram had been, when Catherine shared a third of her gift with him.

"There," her friend smiled, like it was nothing.

Like she'd not just given back her youth, thrown away a third of her lifespan so that Vivienne might live it out instead. When the tears came this time she did not fight them. None mocked her, though, and instead she found arms going around her as the Woe reunited at last.

It was good to be home.

—

They bought a boat in Arwad and first boarded it in the early hours after dawn, which naturally was the moment it all went awry: in other words, at the very beginning. As the years had proved, this was a sadly typical turn of events.

"It's a ship," Masego heatedly objected. "A *ship*, not a boat."

Papers signed by the shipwright attesting to that, legal property and the name of the *Heady Wind* being changed to the *Inevitable Doom* were waved in the face of the others. A sudden but comprehensive bout of blindness preventing anyone from acknowledging this in any way.

"It floats," Indrani insisted. "It's a boat."

"The words *do* rhyme," Vivienne noted. "It checks out."

Motherhood had not softened Vivienne Dartwick. It had, if anything, added some spikes.

"I feel like I ought to have asked before getting on," Hakram gravelled, "but one of us knows how to sail this boat, right?"

"I know you did that on purpose, Hakram," Masego bit out.

He gestured sharply at the sky, wind gutting out and stranding them less than thirty feet away from Arwad's foreign docks. Not a single one of them paid attention to the increasingly angry people on said docks gesturing at them.

"I'm sure Cat could offer us a wise ruling over it," Indrani slyly suggested.

She then tugged at her collar to reveal her collarbone and offered the woman in question an exaggerated wink. Nearly five decades of occasionally sleeping with Catherine had changed Indrani from a terrible seductress to a *proficiently* terrible seductress, something only people with appalling taste could possibly enjoy. Catherine Foundling was such a creature, sadly, but in this case her friend's highly shoddy feminine wiles were to be of no avail.

"I don't do rulings anymore," Catherine informed them. "I'm retired, let go of the reins and all that."

Four skeptical gazes were turned onto her.

"Is that so?" Vivienne doubtfully said.

"Don't give me that tone," Catherine said, wagging a finger at her. "You know what? Wherever we go, I don't even want to be in charge. Someone else can do it this time."

The others conferred.

"She'll crack before the day is out," Indrani said. "I'll put coin on it."

"The *day*?" Vivienne snorted. "She won't last all the way out the harbour. Ten ducals on that."

"I'll take that," Hakram mused. "Pride will make her stick it out at least that long."

"I can hear you, you know," Catherine peevishly said.

"Five denarii she becomes captain before nightfall," Indrani offered.

"I will take that bet," Masego proudly said. "It is my name on the papers, you have been had."

"Mutiny has been the doom of many a boat, Zeze," Hakram told him.

Masego's flesh eye narrowed.

"Have you forgotten I can make your own hand hit you?" he said.

"They used to call it tyranny when I said things like that," Vivienne said, sounding happy. "Now I get to threaten people again. I've been looking forward to that."

"Come on," Catherine loudly complained. "You're all sure I'll go mad with power but she says stuff like that and no one bats an eye?"

On the docks behind them a company of armed guards arrived on the dock, escorting a bearded mage. The Ashuran gestured at the boat, but whatever the spell had been meant to accomplish it ended up setting his beard on fire instead. Masego turned and fixed the mage with a steady look. He began to back away slowly.

"Catherine's insatiable hunger for power aside," Hakram idly said, "I have to ask again because I am getting somewhat worried by the lack of answer. Someone *does* know how to sail the boat, right?"

His bone hand started slapping him on the back of the head, making the tall orc yelp and as he tried to wrestle it down.

"As captain of this ship," Masego proudly said, "I order you to your stations."

Indrani raised her hand.

"Question," she said.

"Yes," Masego allowed.

"Do we have assigned bunks?" Indrani asked.

"Yes," he happily told them. "And designated seats for meals. I have also brought assigned readings. Most of them are things you should know but are inexplicably still ignorant about, but I understand that is not always enough."

He gave them all a confident look that the students attending General Theory of Magic had learned to live in terror of and those few who took Deicide & Applied Blasphemy had learned to look forward to. It was most commonly known as 'Lord Hierophant Trying To Help'.

"So I have obtained recreational books," Masego said. "Which I will also be expecting reports about."

There was pause.

"Some of them," he confided, "are of nautical theme. I thought it would fit our journey thematically."

There was another pause. In the distance behind them, a squad of mages in blue robes formed up on the docks. Archers were lined up behind them and a guard officer was shouting at the boat, not that it made a difference for anyone on it.

"I'm sorry, Masego," Catherine sighed. "I'm going to have to usurp the captaincy of this ship."

"Yes," Vivienne cheered. "That's ten ducals for me."

Masego pouted.

"I should have known your insatiable hunger for power would get the best of you," he sadly said.

A tone that would have had greater effect had he not spent the last several decades using it whenever he was denied a funding increase or permission to make the laws of Creation wince.

"We can still do the assigned readings," she told him, and he perked up.

"Really?"

"Vivienne can," Catherine specified. "Because she fucking crossed me."

"Hey," Vivienne protested. "Do you think I'll just-"

"Indrani," Catherine called out, "if you bully Vivienne into obeying me, I'll pay you five ducals."

She fully intended to get these out of ten that had been bet against her. The long acquaintance of Cordelia Hasenbach had added a touch of biting irony to natural Callowan spite.

"I've done worse for less," Indrani cheerfully agreed.

"-agree you should be in charge?" Vivienne adjusted without batting an eye. "Because I do. Good to have you back, Catherine."

That left only the one. Hakram was still struggling not to his own head, as Masego had forgot to end the spell, so Catherine laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"I'll make it stop," she said.

"Please do," he grunted, wrestling down his wrist.

"I'll make it stop," she continued, "if you stop pretending you don't know how to sail this boat."



A pause.

"I was pulling Indrani's chain," Hakram said. "She wasn't sure whether she was the one supposed to learn or not because she spilled beer over her letter."

"Hakram, you gossipy bitch," Indrani protested. "I told you that in coincidence."

"You'd think they would have learned by now," he mused.

Catherine, magnanimous in victory, got Masego to end the spell and Hakram to move the steering wheel. The wind was released not long after, Indrani climbing up the rigging to the crow's nest, beginning an inevitable countdown before she got bored and shot a seagull under the thing pretence of acquiring fresh meat. Vivienne disappeared under the deck to hide her assigned readings before she could be made to read them, while Masego chased away the blue-robed mages on the docks by bespelling them to start kicking each other whenever they tried to use magic. Years of exposure to Indrani had, sadly, eroded his sense of humour into a strange and violent creature.

Hakram and Catherine moved to the back of the quarterdeck. Hakram took the steering wheel while she stood back, finding wakeleaf to fill her pipe with. Moments later she was puffing away at it, the acrid smoke rising up in curls.

"We're a little late for the tide," Hakram noted. "We might not make it out of harbour before it turns."

"Oh," Catherine Foundling smiled, looking at the sky where a star lay unseen, "I think luck might end up on our side."

It had been many years since she had last seen Akua Sahelian, but never so many as to forget.

"I suppose we're due some," Hakram chuckled.

Wind picked up, a warm breeze carrying the salty taste of the sea with it. It tasted like a promise long overdue.

"So where to?" Hakram asked, hand on the steering wheel.

Catherine considered that for a moment. They would cross the Tyrian Sea in time, on that they had all agreed. But there was no need to hurry, was there? They had earned a little time before they sailed away into the unknown. So as she leaned back against the side of the ship, Catherine Foundling offered her oldest friend a smile.

"Surprise me," she asked, and into the rising sun they sailed.